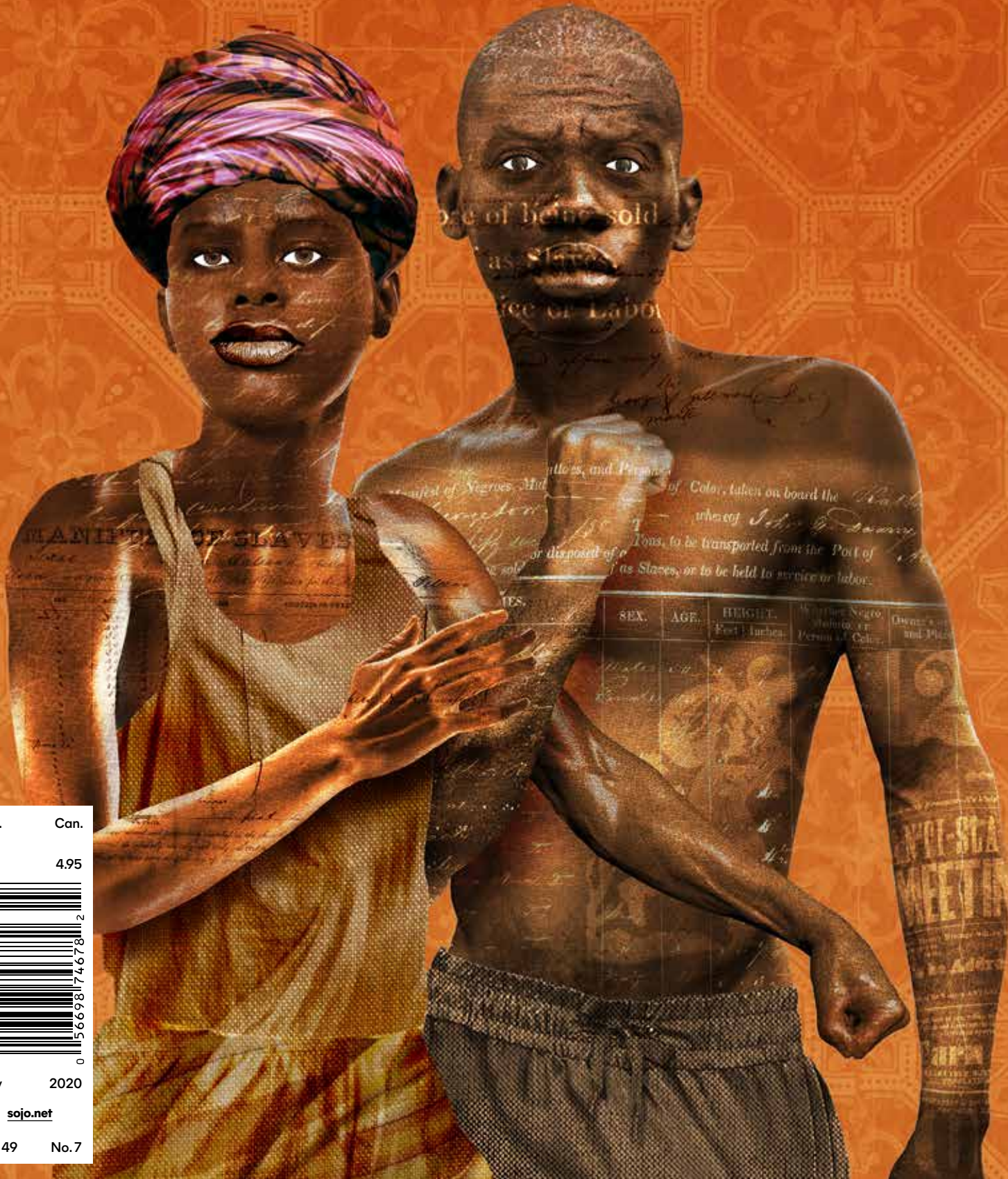


A CHRISTIAN CASE for REPARATIONS

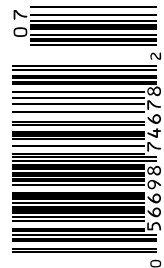
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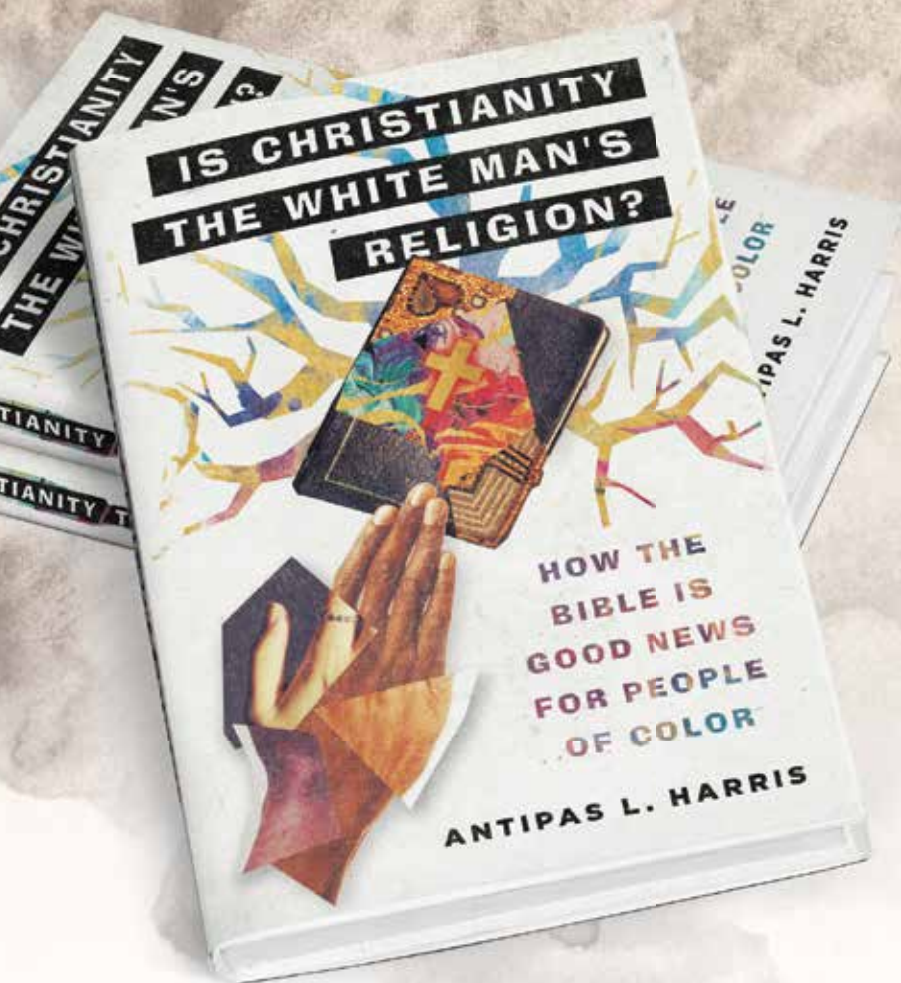


July 2020

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Vol.49 No.7

IS CHRISTIANITY REALLY “GOOD NEWS” FOR EVERYONE?



Young people want to know how their faith relates to race, ethnicity, and societal injustices. Could it be we have been presenting a gospel that does not mirror the actual gospel of the Bible? **Can we honestly say that Christianity is “good news” for everyone?**



ANTIPAS L. HARRIS is an ordained minister, a community activist, and the president and dean of Jakes Divinity School.

“Many folks look at Christianity and conclude it is not for ‘people like us.’ Antipas . . . has created a resource that centralizes the Bible and helps connect Christian faith in light of lived injustice. This book is a gift for those who are seeking authentic spirituality but feeling dissonance between their spiritual hunger and how Christianity is being lived out.”

NIKKI TOYAMA-SZETO, executive director of Evangelicals for Social Action



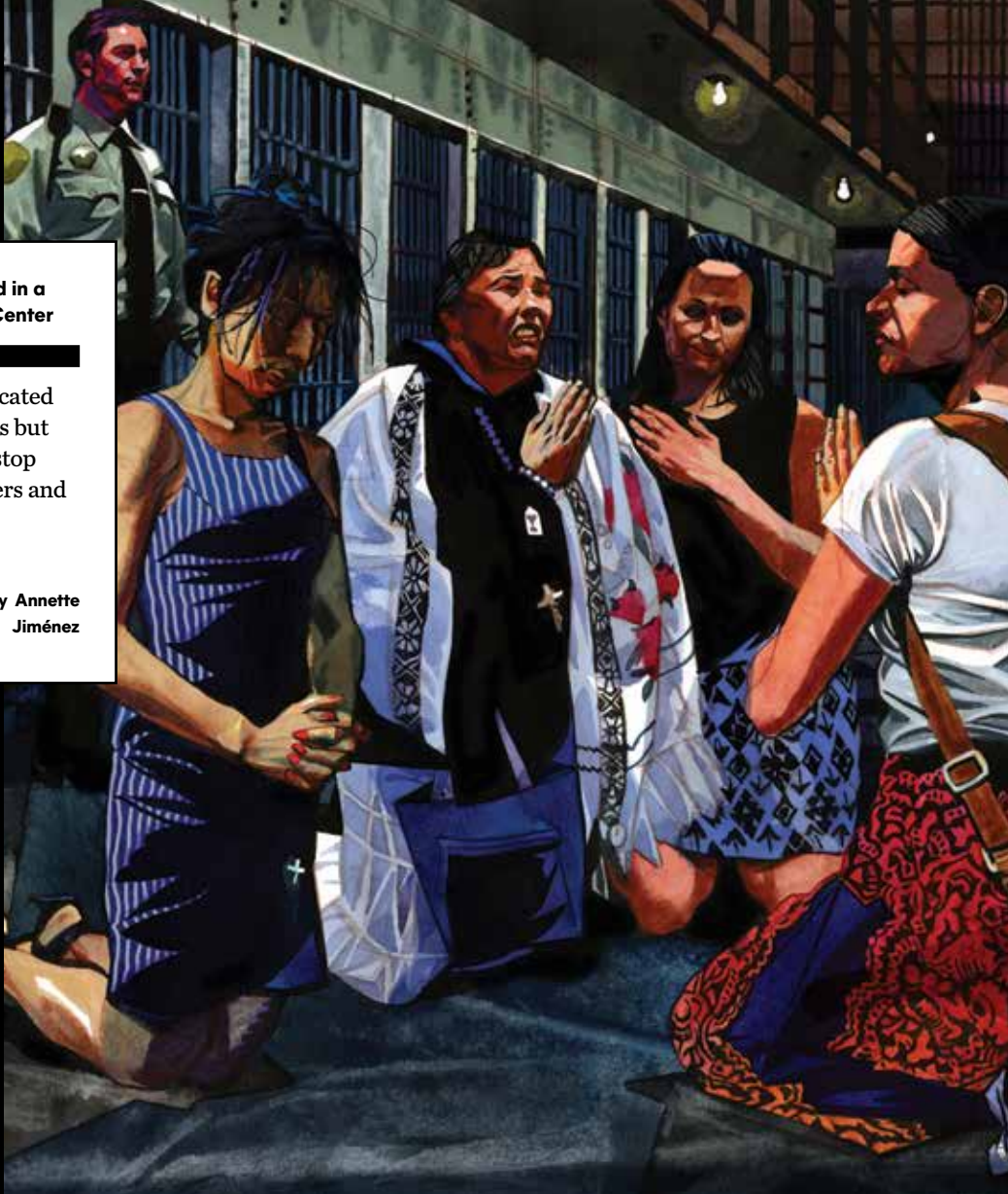
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"SHE PREACHED—SHE HAD AN ORDER AND A DIRECTIVE."

Finding God in a Detention Center

ICE confiscated their Bibles but could not stop their prayers and ministry.

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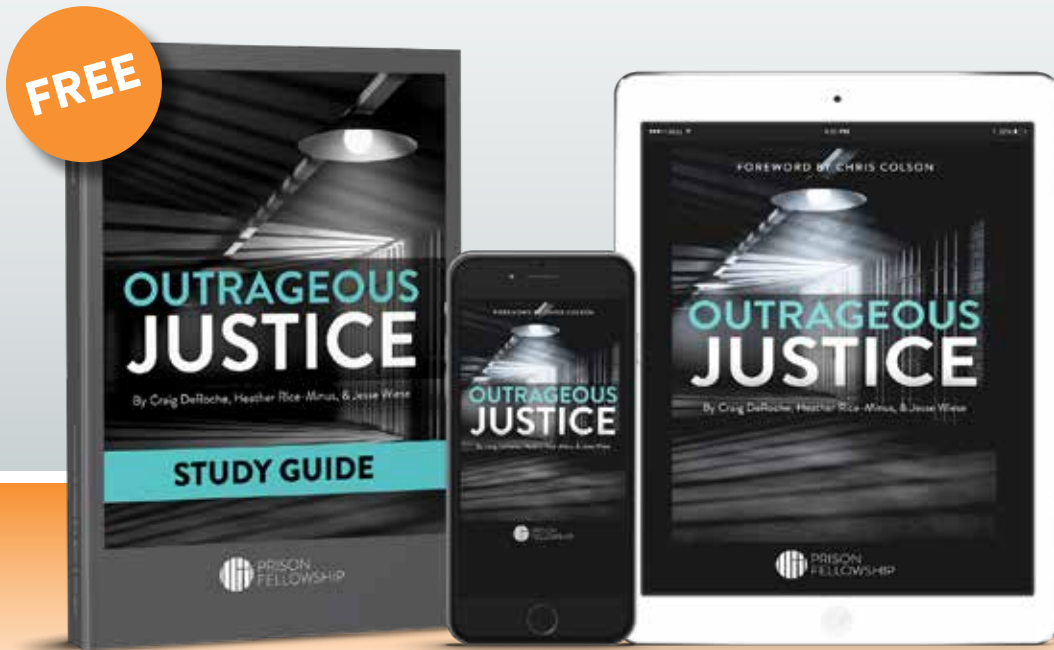


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From the Editor

"Quarantine fatigue" is not adequate justification for jeopardizing people's lives. And yet, as we prepared in mid-May to go to press, states were beginning to reopen for business and pleasure—not because the coronavirus pandemic was under control, but for reasons political, economic, and even conspiratorial. While many people are legitimately concerned about getting back to work to make ends meet, others spout inane—and life-threatening—conjecture about "hoaxes," even as tens of thousands of Americans have succumbed to COVID-19. And even worse, morally, are those—led by the president—who seem cavalier about the very real chance of secondary waves of infections, with consequent sickness and death, in their pursuit of reelection.

Several articles in this issue of *Sojourners* point to the possibility that we will emerge from our current pandemic-defined realities with a new set of eyes—a deeper understanding of fundamental injustices that often go unnoticed (or are willfully ignored) by dominant culture. But there is no guarantee that this time of forced separation will lead to positive change. As always, progress doesn't happen by itself, but only by intentional choices, sustained will, and a commitment to action that addresses those underlying fundamentals. Those choices lie at the heart of what it means to live out our Christian journey in a world so much in need of courageous and faithful discipleship.

RESPONSE

Radio Tracking

In "A Conspiracy of Lies," Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove interviewed journalist Anne Nelson about the secretive network of right-wing operatives who poisoned talk radio (May 2020). "This is important information," wrote Teresa Dianne Hawkes, who noted that she's often heard talk-radio rhetoric echoed in church services. "I travel on the road quite a bit in Northern Michigan for work," wrote Mark Dobias. "The airwaves are full of religious content that is devoid of the teachings of Christ. It is divisive and borders on science fiction dystopian fantasy. There is a not-so-subtle attack in code on the other—the people who are different from their worldview."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH IS NOT DOUBT, BUT CERTAINTY."

Anne Lamott

American novelist and essayist

CONTRIBUTING



Kelly Brown Douglas

When she was young, Kelly Brown Douglas saw two disheveled children out on a cold, rainy night and began to cry; she felt a connection between Jesus' manger birth and those children's lives in the city. Now dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary and Canon Theologian at Washington National Cathedral, Douglas sees her work as "being accountable to those children," she says. "It's about nothing less than partnering with God to build a just future" (p.22).



Natalie Wigg-Stevenson

An ordained Baptist minister, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson lives out her commitment to the church in the classroom as a professor of contextual education and theology (p.28). "I felt the call to be a minister who trains ministers," she says. "The day I was ordained was deeply spiritual, and I continue to feel that with my students—they're my congregation now." Wigg-Stevenson teaches at Emmanuel College in the University of Toronto.

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6.3
million

Number of immigrants
in industries key to
fighting coronavirus,
including health care,
social services, scientific
research, transportation,
and essential retail

29%

Percent of physicians
in the U.S. who are
immigrants

1 in 4

Ratio of workers
manufacturing food,
medicine, and cleaning
supplies who are
immigrants

OUR MISSION

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

MENDING A BROKEN LANDSCAPE

America entered the COVID-19 crisis in a dangerously divided and polarized place, politically and culturally. But by embracing our interdependence, protecting the weakest members of our society, and showing equal concern for one another, we can emerge from this crisis more unified and committed to reimagining and rebuilding a radically more just and healthy nation and world.

This crisis has the potential to force us out of our selfish hyperindividualism; it instead calls us to demonstrate solidarity and love for our neighbor by protecting ourselves and others by sheltering at home and practicing physical distancing for as long

**“DENIAL AND DELAY
HAVE DEADLY
CONSEQUENCES.”**

“COVID-19 PRESENTS US WITH A HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY, TO HEAL INEQUITIES.”

as is deemed necessary for the sake of everyone.

Two decades ago, I preached my first sermon, which reflected upon 1 Corinthians 12 and spoke to the imperative to heal the global body from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which at that time was ravaging the continent of Africa and felt insurmountable. I believed then that the AIDS crisis and our response to it would define my generation, just as the coronavirus will likely be a defining moment for a new generation. I believe there are lessons we can glean from the AIDS pandemic that can help us get through the current crisis.

First is the way in which political and societal denial and delay have deadly consequences. In the 1980s, stigma and denial surrounding the AIDS pandemic enabled the disease to move quickly beyond the gay

community in California and New York, where it was first identified in the U.S., to extend its tragic toll across the country. The nation lost years of precious time to mobilize the necessary resources for effective treatments due in significant part to negligent leadership from President Reagan who refused to publicly acknowledge AIDS for five years after it was identified in 1981. Political delay and denial in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic has also been deadly.

Like AIDS, the coronavirus magnifies and preys upon many preexisting inequalities within society, evidenced by the disproportionate infection rate and death toll among African Americans. Until the cost of AIDS drugs were driven down in the mid-2000s, whether you lived or died depended dramatically on your socioeconomic status and whether you could pay for life itself. As either a treatment or vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available, we can't allow these disparities to remain.

I closed my sermon 20 years ago by emphasizing that I believe that God has a second definition for the acronym HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). HIV also presented an urgent opportunity to “Heal the International Village” by addressing the underlying brokenness and injustices that fueled the epidemic. COVID-19 also presents us with a historic opportunity—and responsibility—to heal and address the inequities that have exacerbated the pandemic's impact. ✦



Adam Russell Taylor is executive director of Sojourners.



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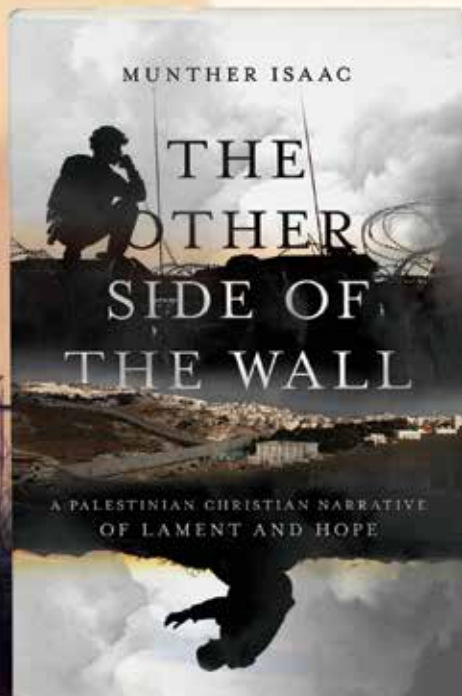
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Step into the Experience of Palestinian Christians



“The Other Side of the Wall is a must-read,
that even in the midst of great suffering and loss
and decades of ongoing occupation, Isaac continues
to hold on to hope in Christ. He reminds us that our
faith can move mountains, elevate justice, and prepare
a path to a better world for Palestinians and all
people in the Middle East and the world.”

Mae Elise Cannon,
executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace



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WHITE SUPREMACY IN A WHITE COAT?

Blackness is not a risk factor for health inequity in the United States. Anti-blackness is.



2

President Trump “discovered” this spring that African Americans are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. “Why is it three or four times more so for the black community as opposed to other people?” he asked during a live coronavirus task force briefing in April. Black social media erupted.

One friend wrote, “The white man said it, but we have been screaming this for years.” Another person posted, “Blackness is not a risk factor. Anti-blackness is the comorbidity.”

I began to seriously consider the impact of race on health while becoming a registered nurse. Combating health disparities in the black community eventually brought me to midwifery. As a health care provider, the language of “comorbidity” (two or more chronic health conditions) and “modifiable health risk” (a risk factor for illness that can be lowered by taking an action) has become part of my vocabulary.

Following Trump’s question at the press briefing, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, responded, “When you look at the

predisposing conditions that lead to a bad outcome with coronavirus ... they are just those very comorbidities that are unfortunately disproportionately prevalent in the African American population.” A few days later, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams noted that minorities are not more predisposed to infection “biologically or genetically,” but rather they are “socially predisposed” to it.

In other words: It’s not race that’s killing black people, it’s racism.

Let me present a case study on hypertension and guidelines for treatment from one of my medical classes. Gerald is a 66-year-old black man with a history of asthma, obesity, and Type 2 diabetes. He smokes a pack of cigarettes a day, denies alcohol use, and rides his bike three times a week. The teacher says, “Tell me, what are his risk factors?” Students shout: “Smoker.” “His age.” “He’s black.” The instructor nods, we move on.

More than once my peers and I have reminded our instructors that presenting race as a risk factor is erroneous, cultivates bias, and can be harmful to patients. Racism, in U.S. society, is a modifiable health risk. Race is not a risk factor.

In April, New York City officials noted that black and Latino residents were dying of the coronavirus at twice the rate of white people. In cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago, more than 70 percent of virus-related fatalities were among African Americans—a staggering statistic given that the percentage is more than double their share of the population.

Anti-blackness has become a distinct social disorder linked to the reality of living as a black person in a highly racialized country. It’s a comorbidity because of how it affects one’s ability to get optimum health care. Anti-blackness mentality and behavior slip into clinical care settings in a variety of ways: When primary care providers don’t trust what black patients say about their levels of pain; when primary care providers label patients who are people of color as “noncompliant” for not having followed medical recommendations; and when health care providers forget that black bodies have historically been experimented on, such as in the Tuskegee syphilis study that ended in 1972.

Black social media’s critique of inequality in health care comes from a credible source: Black experience in America. Those

“THIS CRITIQUE OF HEALTH CARE INEQUALITY COMES FROM A CREDIBLE SOURCE: BLACK EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA.”

affected by racism do not need experts to inform them that racism is a problem or *the* problem.

Cornel West talks about the dangers of maintaining an “allegiance to the status quo.” The current status quo is a modern health care system that includes institutions that are racist and built on principles of white supremacy. Racial/ethnic equity can be achieved when equity is set as a priority, eliminating institutional racism is our focus, and communities that are most affected are equipped with the resources needed to lead this process.

Before my classes moved online due to the COVID-19 lockdown and my on-site clinicals were canceled, one of my professors shared what it means to be a primary care provider. To be a nurse, she said, is to be grounded in the notion that the care we provide must be excellent. Its aim is to create and cultivate the societies that we want to live in—both now and in the future. We cannot allow disparities in health to persist under the weathered guise that it’s all too complex or enigmatic. ❖

Kierra Jackson, RN, is a master’s student in advanced practice nursing at Yale University.



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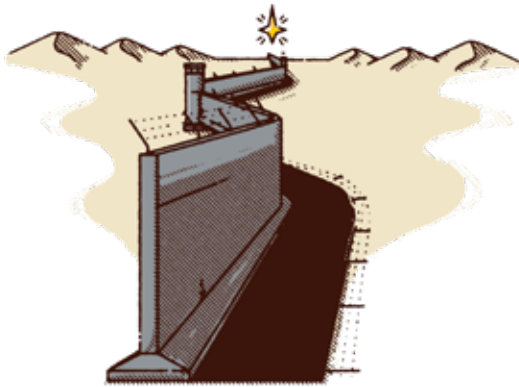


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COMMENTARY

BY MUNTHER ISAAC AND JAMAL KHADER



A DIFFERENT KIND OF ETHNIC CLEANSING

Trump's Mideast 'peace' plan wants Palestinian Christians to just disappear.

As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu prepared this spring to annex significant chunks of the West Bank and further tighten control over Palestinians, with the acquiescence of erstwhile rival Benny Gantz, the blueprint and rationale for his actions has been clear: Donald Trump's so-called "peace" plan. Since the announcement of the U.S. plan in late January, some have explained why it is harmful to even the most basic requirements for peace—but few have analyzed how the Trump plan dealt with Palestinian Christians.

The architects behind the so-called "Peace to Prosperity" plan prefer the nonexistence of Palestinian Christians. These authors share an ideological bias that is troubled by the fact that Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people.

The plan mentions Jews and Christians on one side and Muslims on the other, as if to communicate that this is a religious conflict between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam. While this may serve the partisan domestic purposes of Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, this is not our lived reality as Palestinian Christians.

Let us be clear: The vision of Jerusalem the plan's architects present is one of Israeli hegemony with lip service to Muslim pilgrimage. Christian Palestinians are disappeared. Patronizing language allows that Muslims who "behave well" can visit Jerusalem—but does not mention Arab Christians, as if we have nothing to do with Jerusalem. This plan seeks to transform the Holy Land into a "Zionist fairyland" for the enjoyment of conservative Christians from abroad and Jews, while the local Christian population remains subjugated under Israeli power.

The plan's map shows the lack of available land for the natural growth of Bethlehem. It gives a green light for Israel to annex ancient Christian sites. Many Palestinian Christian church members will lose the land they lived on and farmed for generations. This is a mortal blow to a dynam-

ic Christian presence in the birthplace of Jesus. The "State of Palestine" would not include an airport or a seaport—making Palestine a permanent autonomous area under Israel's control.

One of the most significant aspects for Palestinians in general, and Christians in particular, is Israel's control over the population registry. Thousands of Palestinian Christians, including many who are U.S. citizens, are not allowed to return to their homeland because of Israel's policies. Our churches constantly receive requests for help in family unification cases or for Palestinians in the diaspora who want to visit their relatives and pray in their holy sites. Israel constantly turns down these requests, in some cases citing "security reasons" that no real democracy would treat as such.

For Palestinian citizens of Israel—including 150,000 Christians in important communities such as Nazareth, Haifa, and Jaffa—the plan holds no guarantees for their future. It only recognizes their "civil rights," conveniently dismissing any reference to equal political rights, while also opening the door to strip them of citizenship through Netanyahu's alleged request for forced "population swaps."

"Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people—and only it," said Netanyahu in 2019. His intention and that of the plan is that Palestinian people, including Christians, become "foreigners" or second-class citizens in their own country.

Dismissing international law and basic rules of diplomacy does not make peace possible, but instead deepens the roots of oppression and the denial of rights. This direction does not and will not lead to peace. Peacemaking is a blessing from God; oppression is a sin. Some U.S. officials are misusing the Bible to justify policies of colonization and annexation of occupied territory, crimes under international law. People around the world who believe in justice must say "Enough!"

Drastic cuts in U.S. aid under the Trump administration have left hospitals in East Jerusalem and majority-Arab cities within Israel ill-prepared to deal with COVID-19. While Palestine is back in the headlines, let us push for a just and lasting peace where the rights to freedom and independence are honored. ✕

Munther Isaac is pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. **Jamal Khader** is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Ramallah.

COMMENTARY

BY RACHEL ANDERSON

A

SHOULD CHURCHES ACCEPT FEDERAL AID?

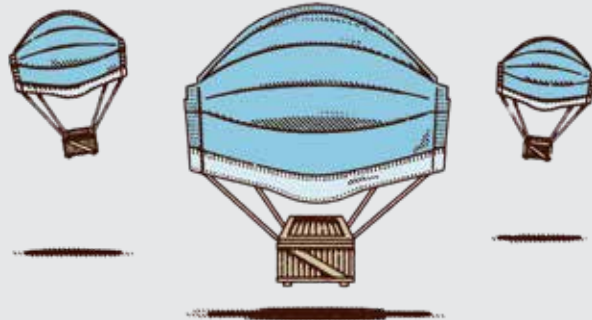
American churches have long harbored suspicion of certain types of government aid.

During the 1930s, clergy worried that federal relief would supplant the churches' role in local communities and undermine their status. Theologically, church and state often are viewed as rivals. State overreach can lead to dangerous empire, a false idol, or threats to religious freedom. Church overreach can court theocracy. The U.S. Constitution requires the government to walk a careful (and sometimes ambiguous) line between enabling religious freedom and avoiding its establishment.

Yet, in a global pandemic with concurrent economic collapse, the state is crucial in protecting public health while also delivering relief to the millions facing financial hardship as the economy grinds to a halt.

Congress has passed massive response packages that outstrip the 2009 stimulus act in response to the Great Recession. First, \$8.3 billion went to vaccine research and public health. Second, Congress established emergency paid sick and family leave and boosted food security and health care funding. Third, \$2 trillion went to enhanced unemployment benefits, direct payments to Americans, and loans to major industries as well as small businesses.

While some public systems that were designed to deliver relief are hobbled by deferred maintenance or ossified around ideological conflicts, many religious communities are meeting the unprecedented needs of ordinary Americans in safe and creative ways. But for how long? No church services mean no collections. Tens of thousands of pastors are unsure if their church will survive the coronavirus pandemic, and a quarter of U.S. churches have reduced staff hours, reduced compensation, or laid off employees, according to Barna Group.



But here are a few tools that have helped. The CARES Act made Small Business Administration (SBA) loans available for the first time to nonprofits, including houses of worship and other faith-based organizations, for paycheck protection programs. Some nonprofits have secured SBA economic injury disaster loans if they are unable to provide the services they normally would offer. COVID-19 legislation has also created several refundable tax credits that are available to nonprofit organizations, such as the employee retention tax credit. Religious workers such as clergy, church and temple administrators, youth ministers, and worship leaders are eligible for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance through their state unemployment agency. Aid is also available through a higher education emergency relief fund, for K-12 schools and students, and for child care through the Child Care Development Block Grant.

We also see churches helping churches. Several national Christian groups launched the Churches Helping Churches initiative to enable large churches to share with smaller ones in the U.S., particularly in low-income urban areas, that face closing because of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis places faith communities and the state in a unique relationship—connected by mutual vulnerability and massive need. In its faltering attempts to deliver relief to millions, the state is revealed as all too human. For faith communities to do the agile and humanizing work that the state cannot do, many congregations may need to accept aid from U.S. taxpayers. When faith communities accept these provisions, it need not be in acquiescence or a disgrace, but rather a form of common grace that both church and state need. ✕

**“RELIGIOUS
 COMMUNITIES
 ARE MEETING
 UNPRECEDENTED
 NEEDS IN SAFE
 AND CREATIVE
 WAYS.”**

Rachel Anderson directs Families Valued, a project of the Center for Public Justice.

CHRISTIANITY'S FIRST PANDEMIC

3



The horror John of Ephesus witnessed in north Africa and Constantinople was so traumatic that it took him three years before he could begin to tell the story.

“Thy judgments are like the great deep,” prayed John of the “cruel scourge” that struck the whole world in 544 C.E., when the plague spread along the trade routes of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. “Like the two edges of the reaper, it successively passed across the earth, and progressed without stopping,” wrote John. The cities stank with unburied corpses. This sixth century deacon and hagiographer wrote, “The mercy of God showed itself everywhere toward the poor, for they died first while everyone was still healthy enough to ... carry them away and bury them.”

No wonder John drew upon the psalms of lament and the “weeping prophet” Jeremiah for guidance. His congregation was dead or dispersed. To anoint and bury the dead meant contamination. All worship was suspended. The normally scrupulous were hoarding and stealing. And rulers who had overspent on imperial expansion placed impossible economic burdens on the survivors.

And then it all happened again 14 more times throughout north Africa—because pandemics recur in waves, sometimes for as long as 200 years.

In Ethiopia, the governor issued edicts against leaving corpses in the street and levied fines on communities that did not bury their dead. Orthodox priests designated “gospel associations,” a small group of the faithful, to carry out burials. Each carried a “staff of Moses” and tree branches to sprinkle holy water as they transported the baptized dead to mass graves.

John noted in his *Ecclesiastical History*, some of which was written

**“PLAGUES OFTEN TOPPLE
IMPERIAL ECONOMIES.”**

in prison, that when a band went out to bury the dead in Alexandria, they each strapped to their arm a tablet with their name and neighborhood, which read: "If I die, for God's sake, and to show his mercy and goodness, let them know at my house, and let my people come to bury me." Hagiographies of "plague heroes" were read aloud to give hope to the faithful.

Over time, "plague theologies" developed. Was the sickness a condemnation from God on all people, a punishment on everyone for failing to keep a covenant? Or was the sickness visited on the righteous by demons infesting certain alienated classes—sinners, foreigners, women?

The first perspective prompted communities to common action, a humanitarian response of mutual aid, and an examination of personal and national conscience. The second notion cued the righteous to get on a war footing to expel or exterminate the demon-infested. It led to ritual exorcisms, banishing strangers, purification of the communal body by expelling the weak and the wicked.

Pandemics seem to follow empires. As empires grow and trade routes expand, a disease once isolated now has a path of expansion. As empires rise, wealth and goods are centralized, labor is devalued, taxation escalates. Plagues often topple imperial economies. A radical redistribution of wealth occurs, either from looting, land theft, or revolution. The Justinian plagues witnessed by John of Ephesus are credited, in part, with ending slavery in the Byzantine Empire. With so few workers left, the value of labor grew. The European plague in the mid-1300s undermined the infrastructure of indentured servitude, paving the way for peasant revolts.

Today, we don't know the full extent of the coronavirus pandemic or its future impact on transnational economics, governments, or societies. But we *do* know that things we believed impossible became possible overnight.

We wonder too what the role of the church is in this "cruel scourge." It is still to feed the hungry, heal the sick, bury the dead. And, like John, to remember. To tell the story of God's mercy and goodness, even amid unbearable grief. ❧

Rose Marie Berger is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



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HOW I LEFT MY BODY



As we sat in the third row of the movie theater, dread washed over me. Would my neck survive this two-hour Spike Lee Joint? I leaned against my non-plush movie seat and looked up at *BlackKkKlansman*, laughing, gasping, and, as always, appreciating Lee's cinematography.

Then, in the final frames of the film, Lee broke the fourth wall to speak directly to his audience. In an instant, we were transported from 1970s Colorado Springs to Aug. 12, 2017, Charlottesville, Va.

My body seized up. Even as my fingers peck out these words, my body is charged with energy. I was there. Hundreds of faith leaders offered public witness in Charlottesville that day. We declared to the world, "There is another way!" Among many other people, 80 priests, pastors, imams, rabbis, and faith leaders walked arm-in-arm to what was then called Lee (now Emancipation) Park, where white supremacists were protesting the removal of a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. We found men armed with AR-15s, guarding "their" turf.

**"I CRIED FOR A WEEK,
THEN GOT ON WITH LIFE."**

We knelt and prayed aloud for our nation. We sang “This Little Light of Mine” for hours. We led a counterprotest with chants of peace and love.

Then hell broke loose.

Some of us were punched and shoved by white supremacists. Antifa defended us. I led a group that ran back to a safe place and spent the next hour in prayer for the others who stayed. Then we heard the news.

Another counterprotester, Heather Heyer, had died, mowed down—along with 19 other people—by a neo-Nazi using his car as a weapon.

A year later, I sat in that dark theater and shook uncontrollably. My body sounded an alarm. My body was still in Charlottesville. I was the last person to leave the theater, my face wet with tears.

Three days later, I bent down to pick something up and felt a severe pain shoot through my leg. I woke up the next morning and could not feel my right leg. The morning after that, I could not get out of bed. I had sciatica.

Immediately following Charlottesville, I left my body. I cried for a week, then got on with life. I filled my days with tasks and travel, takeout and delivery. I lugged my body onto planes, squeezed it into seats and used extender buckles to keep it there, managing my embarrassment and pain by upgrading to larger seats whenever I could. Eating gave instant pleasure and suppressed the pain, but cooking would mean fully connecting to life, agency, and my body. So, Uber Eats became my best friend, and over a year I gained about 30 pounds.

Sciatica got me back into my body. I had no other choice. I had to stretch. I had to feel again. For the past two years I have been on a journey home ... to myself.

Our bodies hold our trauma. If we listen, they will tell us where God wants to heal our souls. Body and soul: They hurt and heal together. Don't forget your body, lest you lose your soul. ❧

Lisa Sharon Harper is president of FreedomRoad.us and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Fortune*, the story of her family and a call for reparations.

FIVE CENTURIES of ACTIVISM and FAITH

*What Justice-Seekers Can Learn
from Latina/o Faith*



Robert Chao Romero

is an associate professor at UCLA and the author of the award-winning *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*, *Jesus for Revolutionaries*, and *Mixed Race Student Politics*.

“This book is about much more than the Brown Church. It is about church, gospel, truth, and justice. It is about me who is Brown but also about you who are not. This is an important read for any who wish to be faithful Christians in today’s context.”

JUSTO L. GONZÁLEZ,

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EYEWITNESS

4



“IF ONE PERSON GOT
THE DISEASE, IT
WOULD REALLY
SPREAD SO FAST
TO OTHER PEOPLE.”

WORKING FROM HOME ISN'T AN OPTION HERE



"In our community, the way homes are clustered and clumped together, there is no social distancing. There is poor water supply. There is a poor drainage system. What hit me so hard was that if this disease were to get in the areas where we are working, it would mean that the whole population of that area would be cleared out. Because if one person gets the disease, it would really spread so fast to other people.

People in Mathare [in Nairobi] depend on day-to-day activities for earning income—you wake up in the morning, someone will call you to wash their clothes, to do their household chores. So you can't tell them to work from home because they have to go out and [earn money] for food. Yes, they are scared of the disease and no one wants to get it, but sometimes they feel, 'If I stay at home, me and my children are going to die hungry, so I have to keep getting out and looking for food.' It's a matter of which one is the lesser evil. Should I stay at home and not get coronavirus? Or go out and look for food and pray that everything will be okay?

So far, we thank God we haven't had any COVID-19 cases. What keeps me going is the desire to preserve life and preserve communities. These populations are already at risk, even without any pandemic. With the pandemic, the risk is even heightened—so this is the time when they need us most to be there." ♦

Judith Siambe is program manager of the Centre for Peace and Nationhood (CPN), a program of the Kenya Mennonite Church supported by Mennonite Central Committee. She and Christabel Awuor, maternal and child health and nutrition officer, spoke with *Sojourners* about CPN's COVID-19 prevention efforts in Nairobi's Mathare slums.

THE LEGACY OF THE WHITE LION

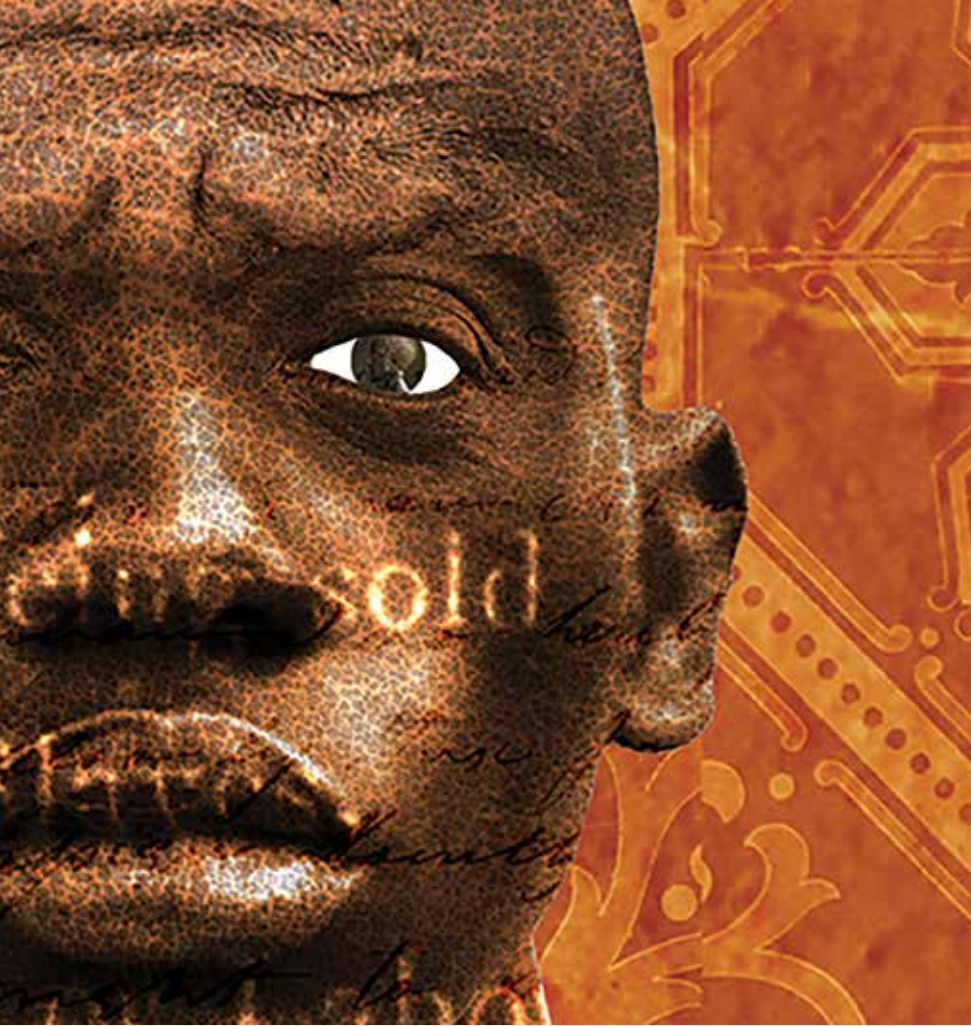
*A Christian case for
slavery reparations.*



By
KELLY BROWN
DOUGLAS

Illustrations by
DAVE MCCLINTON





To the best of our historical knowledge, in August 1619 a ship named White Lion landed at a coastal port near Point Comfort, Va., carrying 20 to 30 captive Africans to be sold into slavery. This landing symbolizes the construction of race as a defining and indelible feature of America's core identity. It stamped black bodies with the ineradicable identity of subhuman chattel. As such, it signaled the white supremacist foundation upon which America's capitalistic democracy, with all its sociopolitical systems and structures, would be built.

Today, the legacy of the White Lion landing prevails in almost every sector of American life. Black people continue to suffer 21st century versions of slavery, such as poverty, mass incarceration, and substandard schools. More than 400 years after the White Lion landing, two things are clear: As Nikole Hannah-Jones reminds us in *The New York Times*' 1619 Project, there has never "been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed," and there has been no genuine effort to truly end white supremacist injustice itself. Consequently, there have been renewed calls for reparations.

THE BLACK MANIFESTO

The idea of reparations was brought back to public attention in 2014 when Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic*, making clear that until the nation reckons with its "compounding moral debts, America will never be whole." As this is true for the nation in general, it is likewise true for faith communities, as the authors of what became known as the Black Manifesto recognized more than 50 years ago.

In May 1969, civil rights leader James Forman disrupted the services of Riverside Church in Manhattan to deliver the Black Manifesto written at the National Black Economic Development Conference, which had convened in Detroit. The manifesto demanded \$500 million for reparations from "white churches and Jewish synagogues" for "aiding and abetting" the "exploitation of colored peoples around the world."

This money was to be used for a range of programs to support economic growth, educational opportunities, and the psychological well-being of the black community.

While some white and Jewish faith communities, as well as seminaries, responded by giving funds to various projects and organizations within the black community, the Black Manifesto's goals never came to fruition.

Now, more than 50 years later, various religious institutions and faith communities are responding to the renewed call for reparations by Coates and others. For example, the Episcopal Church's Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria has set aside \$1.7 million for a reparations fund. Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey established a \$27 million endowed fund to address historical theft of labor and discrimination. These and

other institutions have set up funds to pay or provide scholarships to descendants of the enslaved people who provided the labor upon which their buildings and wealth have been built, while also finding ways to support various black ministries. However, the question remains: Is this enough?

WHAT MUST REPARATIONS LOOK LIKE?

Notwithstanding the fact that no amount of financial reparations can compensate for the generational harm and injustice black people have suffered due to the sin of white supremacy, some form of reparation remedies is in order to at least repair the ever-widening breach of inequities between the white and black communities. This breach has been made ever more evident during the COVID-19 crisis. Longstanding structural and systemic inequalities and ongoing racial bias have resulted in black communities being disproportionately impacted by the virus. Nevertheless, for faith communities it must be about more than compensatory reparations in the attempt to repair the harm that has been done.

For inasmuch as faith is about partnering with God to mend an unjust earth, and thus to move us toward a more just future, then faith communities by *definition* are accountable to that future.

This means that for them, reparations should be directed toward building a future where all human beings are respected as the sacred creations that they are and thereby free to live into the fullness of their sacred creation. For faith communities, reparations must not be only an effort to compensate for past harms, they must also chart a pathway to a just future. Otherwise, reparations become little more than a salve for white guilt while the sin of white supremacy continues to thrive.

What then must reparations look like? There are at least three key aspects for any form of reparations that emerge from the wider faith community.

‘DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME’

As many continue to examine the complex and multidimensional legacy of the White Lion, the related legacy of faith communities is often overlooked.

In faith communities, reparations must begin with anamnestic truth-telling. Anamnesis means “memorial sacrifice.” Its origins are in Jesus’ words, “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19). This is not a

“ CHOOSING WHITENESS IS AN IMMORAL CHOICE. ”

passive process but one in which Christians enter *into* the sacrifice. It is about being accountable to the past in the very present.

For faith communities, such truth-telling is not merely a retrospective accounting of one’s culpability in white supremacist realities in an effort to apologize for and perhaps be pardoned for past misdeeds. Rather, anamnestic truth-telling confronts the ways in which the past remains alive in the present, thus paving the way to right the present by exonerating it from contemporary vestiges of the past.

Such truth-telling means first confronting the ways in which ecclesial and institutional systems, structures, and cultural norms reflect white supremacist narratives, ideologies, and constructs—then intentionally working to dismantle and transform them.

For instance, it is no coincidence that most black bishops in my own Episcopal faith community have not led dioceses, but instead were elected as suffragans to assist the diocesan bishop. The role of suffragan bishops was established, in part, to elevate black priests to the episcopacy, thus sparing white bishops from the “humiliating” task of caring for black souls. At the same time, the role withheld actual episcopal authority from those same black suffragans—such as the right to vote in church conventions and the right to succeed the diocesan bishops above them. Moreover, the Episcopal Church must acknowledge that, given its past as the church of wealthy slaveholders, it is not a coincidence that, in 2018, the church’s racial demographic was *whiter* than the U.S. racial demographic in 1790.

Anamnestic truth-telling also acknowledges the ways seminaries continue to perpetuate a culture that has made it difficult for black people to attain a theological

education. How is it that the culture that denied pioneering priest and educator Alexander Crummell entry into General Theological Seminary in 1839 persists in new and updated ways in various seminaries today?

A second aspect of anamnestic truth-telling recognizes the theological legacy of white supremacy within various faith traditions. One must recognize the way in which Christianity's monotheistic claims not only provided justification for enslaving black people and sacred legitimation for white supremacist policies such as the Discovery Doctrine, but also continue to provide theological legitimation for aggressive policies that dehumanize, if not destroy, people who are seen as religiously or culturally different, tacitly fostering a kind of Christian nationalism. In this way, it is perhaps no accident that the majority of white U.S. Christians today support "protectionist" policies.

The point of the matter is that reparations must involve an interrogation of the ways in which fundamental aspects of Christian theology have been used to legitimate white supremacist realities and have become a part of the collective theological consciousness. As such, they have unwittingly fostered support for white supremacist policies and ideologies. Such interrogation is particularly imperative for theological seminaries as they prepare future faith leaders. If seminary and theological curricula do not critically interrogate the white supremacist implications of Christian theological claims, then seminarians will have little chance of doing better than previous generations when it comes to dismantling a white supremacist culture and society, let alone church.

In the end, it is only with anamnestic truth-telling that "repairing" the harm of white supremacy can begin. What is needed in our faith communities, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, "is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts," lest those old ghosts continue to haunt us.

FOSTERING MORAL IDENTITY

This leads to another aspect of reparations for faith communities: fostering a moral identity.

Fostering a moral identity in a society shaped by a white supremacist culture that privileges whiteness even as it penalizes people of color, sometimes unto death, means to self-consciously name and intentionally denounce white privilege. Maintaining white privilege is not about



"being racist"; rather, it is about benefitting from white supremacist realities. One does not have to be overtly racist to do that.

Choosing whiteness—even when it is simply a passive refusal to confront what it means to be a beneficiary of white supremacy and its legacy—is an immoral choice. As such, it betrays our common humanity as equal children of God. For the Christian faith community, whiteness further belies our core identity as a faith tradition with a crucifixion at its center.

That Jesus was crucified, and refused to save himself from being crucified, reveals that he emptied himself of all privilege that might separate him from the victims of the deadly political, cultural, and religious realities of his day.

Through this shedding of power, Jesus at once denounced the crucifying privileges of whiteness while affirming the crucified realities of blackness. Theologian Jon Sobrino put it this way: "The cross, for its part, tells of God's affinity with victims."

What is made clear, therefore, is that one cannot be at once white and Christian. To claim whiteness is essentially to make peace with crucifying privilege—thus complying with the crucifying realities of white supremacy. Ecclesiastical institutions and faith communities must lead the way toward claiming a moral identity by naming and freeing themselves from their own institutional realities of white privilege.

ACT AS IF THE FUTURE IS NOW

This brings us to a final crucial aspect of reparations for faith communities: prophetic participation. If faith communities and institutions are to repair the breach between the unjust present and God's just future, then they must act prophetically; that is, as if that future is now. This means that faith communities must be an active presence in the public square as sanctuary and witness.

To be a sanctuary necessitates that no individual should feel diminished or unsafe because of who they are or are not within a faith community or institution. Faith leaders must work to make their spaces free of bigotry or intolerance, not simply in the most overt ways that these are expressed but also in the subtle ways that often go unnoticed. These ways may be embedded in the fabric of buildings or even in the fabric of programming, curricula, and worship.

What are the images and icons in our churches and seminaries? What is the story they tell? And who tells it? What is the

music that is played? These are the kind of questions necessary for faith communities to be a sanctuary for all people.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that images of a Black Christ are important for more than just black congregations, just as bilingual worship is important for more than just Latinx congregations or congregations with Latinx congregants. Including these things in faith communities where people of color are not significantly present signals the sacredness of bodies and cultures of people of color—thus defying white supremacist cultural and ideological narratives.

Faith communities must also witness to God's just future. This requires nothing less than calling out racism, xenophobia, and any other forms of dehumanization, even when they masquerade in politically correct language like "greatness." Put simply, silence, indifference, and passivity are not options. Faith communities do not have the option, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, to remain "silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."

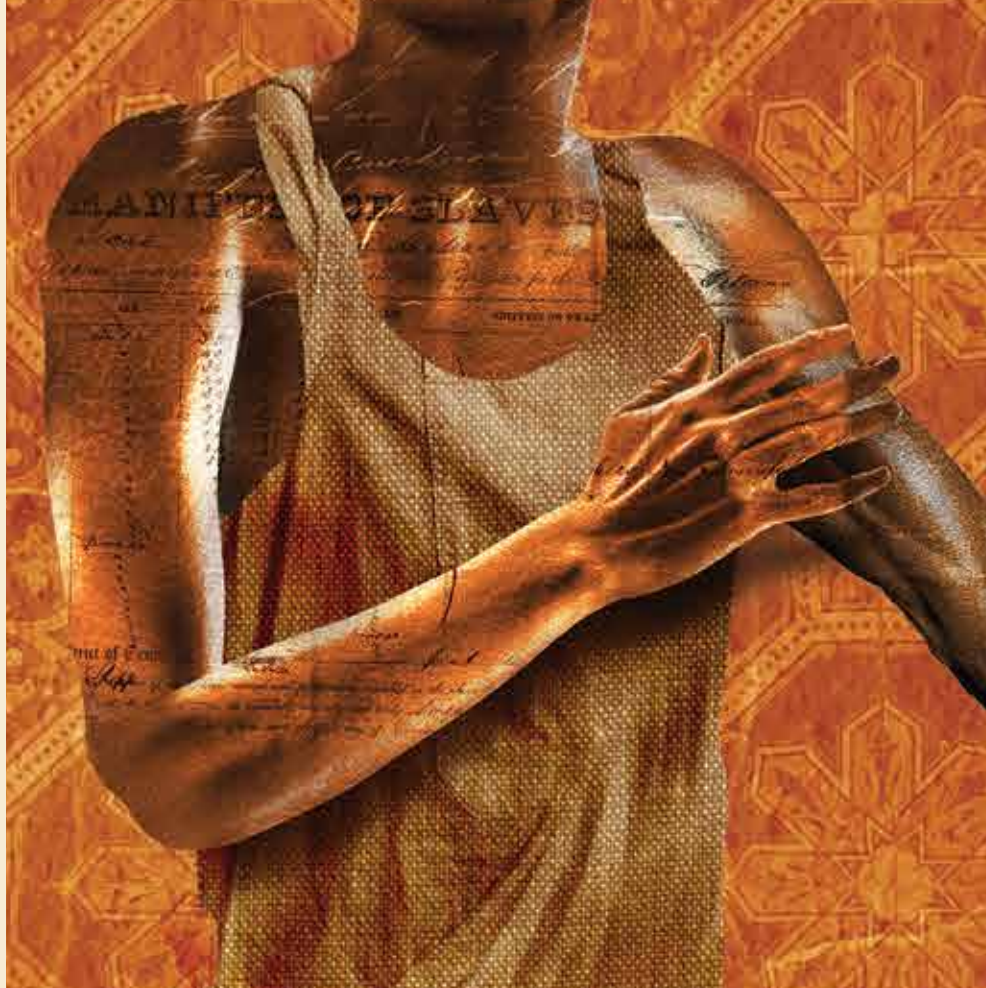
To be a witness demands that faith communities boldly lead the way toward building a just society, thereby freeing the nation from its captivity to the sinful, systemic, structural, cultural, and ideological legacy of the White Lion.

REPAIRING FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

Not long ago I attended a meeting with seminary leaders where reparations were discussed. One attendee offered that he was grateful that none of his institution's buildings were built with enslaved labor, so the matter of reparations was not one that his institution had to engage.

Of the many issues that I had with his declaration—let alone my doubts regarding the veracity of that claim for a Southern institution—I was affirmed in my belief that the "reparations" being offered by many faith communities and institutions were not reparations at all. The fact of the matter is—after the money has been paid to enslaved ancestors or for scholarships and other programming—systems and structures are not disrupted. Life goes on as usual—and these institutions continue to benefit from the ongoing legacy of white supremacy to the detriment of people of color.

Four hundred years after the White Lion brought the economics of chattel slavery to English-speaking America, and



“

SLAVERY REPARATIONS ARE ABOUT THE FUTURE AS MUCH AS THE PAST.

”

more than 50 years after James Forman demanded white and Jewish faith communities make economic reparations to descendants of enslaved people, we are only slowly, in some places, beginning to even recognize the need for truth-telling, claiming moral identities, and living as if the future is now.

At the end of the day, God calls us all to a future where the first are last and the

last are first (Matthew 20:16). Such a future does not reflect a reversal of privilege and penalty. Rather, it is a time when there is no first or last because everyone is treated and respected as the equal child of God that they are. It is left for faith communities to “repair the breach” between the present injustice and God’s just future. Reparations must not simply look back, but most importantly must push forward. ♦

Kelly Brown Douglas is an Episcopal priest and the author of *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. She is dean of the Episcopal Divinity School and the Bill and Judith Moyers Chair in Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.



When a trusted spiritual LEADER turns out to be a sexual PREDATOR

After the death of **Jean Vanier**, six women came forward to tell their stories of sexual abuse while under his spiritual direction. The violation threatens not only our sense of security but also our confidence about what is good and what is evil.

By NATALIE WIGG-STEVENSON

Illustration by David Plunkert

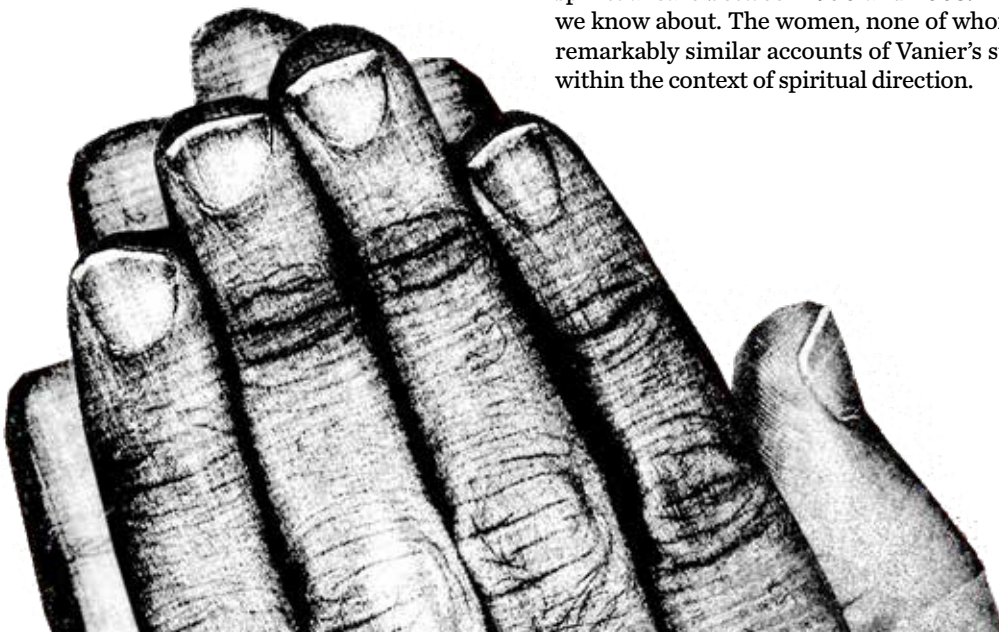
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Men of power have always abused that power.

Every woman knows it, which is why none of us were surprised when #MeToo came for the church. But we weren't prepared for Jean Vanier.

The details of Vanier's story are well known by now, but they bear repeating. Vanier, who died in May 2019 at the age of 90, was the internationally celebrated co-founder of L'Arche, a global network of homes where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together in community. A Roman Catholic layperson who never married, Vanier was regarded by many as a living saint; his *New York Times* obituary hailed him as "Savior of People on the Margins." His writings on spirituality and community were best sellers and universally revered as modern classics.

Vanier was also a sexual predator. A report following a posthumous investigation by L'Arche International, the organization that Vanier founded, revealed that he sexually abused at least six women in his spiritual care between 1970 and 2005. These six cases are the ones we know about. The women, none of whom knew each other, offered remarkably similar accounts of Vanier's strategy of sexual predation within the context of spiritual direction.



L'Arche's summary report is excruciating to read, because it reveals a pattern of manipulation and exploitation shot through Vanier's role as a spiritual director. "He told me that this was part of the [spiritual] accompaniment," one survivor reported. Even as she told him she was struggling to "distinguish what was right and what was wrong," he pushed on, offering bizarre scriptural warrant from the Song of Solomon and—perhaps most chillingly—his contention that in their sexual interaction, "This is not us, this is Mary and Jesus."

Preying on vulnerability

The temptation in a situation like this is simply to draw a firm line separating the good from the evil, as if motivations can be so easily divided. In Vanier's case, however, we also have to entertain the possibility that the two branches of his life stemmed from the same root: that the sensitivity to vulnerability and communal belonging that gave birth to the undeniable beauty of L'Arche was the very thing Vanier exploited for his own sexual gratification in his private spiritual direction.

Hitherto overlooked aspects of his biography suggest as much. In 1950, as a young man of 22, Vanier resigned his postwar military commission to seek out peace. He became a student at L'Eau Vive, a small philosophical and theological institute in France founded by a 45-year-old French priest, Father Thomas Philippe, whom Vanier would later call his "spiritual father." The relationship proved determinative for the course of Vanier's life.

Thirteen years later, Father Thomas was chaplain at Le Val Fleuri, a small institution for men with developmental disabilities, and he invited Vanier to visit him there. The institution was, as Vanier describes it, a terrible place: dank, dark, violent, wretched. But amid all that, Vanier saw it to be "beautiful." "This is my experience of having been in many dark places—prisons, psychiatric wards, slums, leper colonies. There's something frightening, but also something beautiful, a sense of wonderment. It's mysterious."

This encounter with the intersection of terror and wonder inspired Vanier the following year to invite three men with profound intellectual disabilities to move into a shared home with him. Two of these men, Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, are frequently named in accounts of L'Arche's history, though rarely acknowledged as the movement's co-founders. (The third man is rarely mentioned at all, and his name seems lost to history.) It's clear, then, that like most origin stories, L'Arche's is almost always told in an overly romantic way. Accounts tend to emphasize Vanier's

purchase of a broken-down house in a small (i.e., charming) French village, for example, as a mark of his definitive turn away from privilege toward something humbler.

Indeed, I've never seen the story told in a way that reckons with the fact that a dilapidated building might not be the best place to live for people with profoundly unique needs. It's also rarely mentioned how the experiment failed, because Vanier didn't have the requisite skills and experience to care for men with as significant disabilities as those of Simi and Seux and, it seems, even more so, the third anonymous man.

But, romanticism aside, this failed experiment did lead to a much more successful one, inspiring L'Arche and the countless people who have created vulnerable communities across difference since that day.

The branch of Vanier's life that led to L'Arche, however, was not the only one that sprang from L'Eau Vive and Father Thomas. As is increasingly clear, Vanier the predator came from the same place. In 1952, the Catholic Church removed Thomas from ministry, supposedly for health reasons. At that time, he was told not to communicate with Vanier or with any of the students from L'Eau Vive.

In recent years, it came to light that both Thomas and his brother, Marie-Dominique, also a priest, had perpetuated and covered up for each other's sexual abuse of numerous women. As the new L'Arche report indicates, Thomas and Marie-Dominique and several other conspirators—including other students from L'Eau Vive and a group of nuns—had perpetuated this abuse together, using the same bizarre theological and mystical justifications as Vanier.

Vanier denied any knowledge of what he called the brothers' "sexual perversions" when they were revealed. What is now clear is that Vanier had been their disciple all along, extending their sexual malevolence through his own ministry. In the 11 years between 1952 and 1963, when contact between them was prohibited, Vanier communicated discreetly with Thomas using code names and acted as a proxy for Thomas' continued leadership of the theological school. The similarities in their patterns of abuse are definitive. The Vanier who abused women was not a fallen saint, succumbing to the temptations and opportunities afforded him by his rising fame. This was who he had been all along: a man exquisitely and terribly attuned to the vulnerabilities of others.

Usurping the power of God

Given Vanier's lifelong proximity to and care for people with intellectual disabilities, most reporting on these matters generally takes pains to note that the women he abused were not disabled—presumably because the additional layers of vulnerability involved in disability would have compounded his sin. At stake, of course, is the capacity to give consent. But even if Vanier never abused any L'Arche members with disabilities—and we may never know—the question of consent haunts what has already been revealed.

I can imagine the response of each woman when she learned that he had agreed to take her on for spiritual direction. I'm sure she was surprised, grateful, and more than a little bit nervous. When he invited her to meet him in his private room for their session, she probably felt a twinge of concern before brushing it away with the embarrassment of ingratitude. He lives in community, she might have thought;

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**"HE TOLD ME
THIS WAS PART
OF THE SPIRITUAL
ACCOMPANIMENT."**

his room is the only place that has the requisite privacy for spiritual direction. The hypervigilance that all women carry in our bodies to protect ourselves from sexual predators didn't seem to be necessary here. Then later, when he told her to come to his room at 10 p.m., she probably felt another twinge before chastising herself again. He's being generous with his time, she might have thought, of which I'm not even worthy. This is Jean Vanier, after all. If I can't trust *him*, who can I trust?

Who knows how long he stretched out the pursuit, how long he reached a little further but not too far? How long she ignored her twinges of apprehension until dismissing her intuition became second nature? Long enough that when, as one woman put it, "the spiritual accompaniment transformed into sexual touching," she didn't simply say "no" right away. It can be easy to blame the victim in the report who said, "was I consenting? I think at the beginning yes, but as time went on, the more I believe that I was not consenting." We think of consent as happening in the moment, not revocable after the fact. But when it comes to the predatory power of a globally recognized charismatic figure such as Vanier, consent can be complex.

The problem with formal reports in cases like these is that they jump right to the moment that things are no longer so fuzzy, when they cross the border where they've changed from seeming normalcy to the shocking need for a "no." Such reports don't capture the lead-up that makes those borders so permeable in the first place: the ways in which a "new normal" has been slowly established. "No" seems obvious with hindsight; explicit and implicit yeses are a little bit trickier to track in the moment. Vanier, it's clear, counted on that. He didn't charge across the borders: He just kept shifting them slightly—and he did so with all the theological, ethical, spiritual, and charismatic authority that a man of his stature had at his disposal.

Sexual abuse is always about power. But not just the power one person has to exert over another. Vanier's power was much more insidious and, thereby, much more powerful. It's not that he could tell the women what to do and then they'd do it. It's that he could make up the hidden rules that controlled what kinds of



conversation could and could not be admitted to the realm of possibility. This included his power to keep consent from even entering the arena of conversation. But he also had the power to define the theological frame of conversation. Given that the spiritual director takes the person in their care on a theological journey that draws them deeper into the heart of God, that's a lot of power to hold.

Manipulating truths about desire

While sexual abuse is always about power, it is also about sex. And if we are to reckon fully with what it means that Jean Vanier, of all people, was an abuser, we will have to deal with the theological category of desire. Because Vanier learned how to manipulate a truth about desire and God to his own abusive ends.

It is not incidental that Vanier's abuse was part of his practice as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction is intense: part therapy, part prayer, and—at its best—part mystical approach toward God. Traumas surface. Emotions erupt. Transference and counter-transference are normal. In other words, like most other forms of therapy and direction, spiritual direction is a context in which it is normal for eros to arise. In healthy practices of spiritual direction, the director recognizes this relational potential and holds a firm boundary for the well-being of the person under direction. Vanier, it seems, exploited the vulnerability inherent to the practice for his own gratification.

Passion for God is complex and not entirely unerotic. Sexual desire and desire for God are intimately connected to each other precisely because God's own desire is always luring us toward an ecstatic participation in Divine life. The mystics were on to something when they described union with God in sexual terms. So too is evangelical praise and worship music with its consistent erotic undertones: *in the secret, in the quiet place*, and all that. Just as we catch glimpses of God's love in our love for one another, so too can we catch glimpses of God's desire in our desire for one another—and this is not limited to, but certainly is inclusive of, desire that is sexual. We are finite creatures reaching toward infinite possibilities, all the while oriented within the reality of eternal life. It's no wonder things can get confusing. What any of us does with that confusion matters. What Vanier did with it was wrong.

The place where desire for God and sexual desire connect is the intersection of terror and wonder that Vanier knew so well. This is probably why Christians—for better and for worse—legislate desire so carefully. We tend to be divided over which of its forms can fall

IF THE #METOO MOVEMENT HAS TAUGHT US ONE THING, IT'S THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE.

within the realm of God's sanctifying grace. I'm not going to take up those arguments here. I do want to claim that this site of terror and wonder—this place where sexual desire teaches us more about our desire for God and where our desire for God teaches us more about our sexual desire—is sacred. And the sacred can never truly be safe.

Our hearts are restless, St. Augustine famously promised, *until they find their rest in Thee*. When that mystical desire arises in spiritual direction, it's the spiritual director's job to redirect that energy toward God: to direct *that restless heart toward rest in Thee*.

I think Vanier knew all about restless hearts, and that he sought to make them more restless still. Then, instead of redirecting them toward rest in God, he kept luring them toward himself. He used it to inflict a set of manipulative sexual-spiritual practices on a group of vulnerable women in his care: women who he in fact had the power to make vulnerable precisely by their being in his care. Vanier stole God's rightful place. He made of himself an idol.

If we've learned one thing from the #MeToo movement, it's that we're a long way from the utopia where men of power no longer abuse that power to harm women. Others are more hopeful than I am; some even think we can get there, but I strongly doubt that, on this side of the reign of God. As women, and some men, have shared their stories of abuse, though, we've learned to better recognize that evil among us. Because if the #MeToo movement has taught us a second thing, it's that we're not alone.

Vanier warped and twisted theology to manipulate and destroy women's lives. But theology has always been misused this way by some, and Vanier's cruelty is more a reminder of this fact than a revelation. Bringing an end to—or, let's be honest, perhaps at best for now just stemming the tide of—spiritual and sexual abuse by Christians will require more than just addressing individual assaults on a case-by-case basis. It will require a wholesale reimagining of how we understand even our most sacred theological categories. Even what appears to be good can be twisted to evil in the wrong hands. Vanier reminds us that we can really never know whose hands those are. ❧

Natalie Wigg-Stevenson is a professor of contextual theology at Emmanuel College in Toronto and the author of *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge*.





FINDING GOD

in a
detention
center

ICE confiscated
their Bibles, but they
still found a way to
worship behind bars.

By Annette Jiménez

**Illustrations
by Jeffrey Smith**



A

After Carmen and her son, William, were set on fire by gang members and then rescued by a passerby, they fled El Salvador to seek refuge in the United States. In a caravan headed north through Mexico, by chance they met five family members: Carmen's sister, Cecilia; Cecilia's husband, Oscar; and the couple's three teenage children—twin daughters and a son.

When they reached the end of their 2,800-mile trek to the U.S. border outside Tijuana, Mexico, the entire family surrendered to U.S. immigration officials.

That's where, in November 2018, they met Monica Curca, founder and director of Activate Labs, a nonprofit organization focused on peacebuilding and human-centered "peace design." The family members (surnames withheld for their safety) were among 30 immigrants for whom Curca's organization provided advocacy and accompaniment and arranged financial sponsorship upon their entry into the U.S.

Once in the immigration system, the men and women were separated and sent to federal detention centers in Arizona and California; the men were detained for eight months and the women for five. William was separated from the family entirely, Curca explained. He ended up detained in Ferriday, La., in the former River Correctional Facility, a prison converted into an immigration detention center. Having been left for dead in El Salvador, he could have qualified for asylum—a form of legal protection for refugees who fear persecution in their native countries. But the activists working with him could not procure a lawyer, said Curca, and he was so miserable he chose deportation rather than prolong the suffering.

“He didn’t see any hope,” Curca said.

Cecilia and Oscar’s family had also fled El Salvador to escape threats from gangs. Shortly

cluding their Bibles, but that did not stop them from finding a way to worship and pray in detention. They quickly formed a prayer group; one woman would sing, another gave witness, and the group found a structure to its informal liturgy.

Upon their transfer to Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, they discovered a table with books from which they selected a Bible they carry with them to this day. They also met a woman who had been in detention for nearly two years and had taken on a pastoral role for fellow detainees of faith. “She preached, she had an order and a directive,” Ceci said.

The women would gather in a tiny room for prayer and worship every Sunday morning, but they were very restrained in how they could express themselves; they could not even raise their voices in praise, said Ceci. “If someone was crying or sick, they didn’t allow us to [embrace them] or have any physical contact with anyone.”

The power of their new faith community shone when they came together to comfort a fellow detainee who had

Carias and another pastor held services for their fellow immigrants six days a week.

before heading for the caravan, Oscar received a death threat in a call demanding \$3,000 in cash in addition to the monthly “protection” fee he had been paying to operate a fruit stall at a local market. Activate Labs sent a recording of the call to *Sojourners*. In the audio clip, the gang member identifies the family members by name and says, “I will kill all of you.”

“Where we were living, they were extorting [Oscar], demanding more than what he already was paying,” explained Ceci, one of the twins. She said the gangs continue to threaten William, her cousin, with whom family members remain in contact when he is not in hiding. William wishes to return to the U.S., said Curca, because “no one is safe in El Salvador.”

For Curca of Activate Labs, this family’s story, like so many others, dispels the common narrative that immigrants travel to the U.S. only for economic reasons. Though the family was not wealthy, they did not flee their native country to make money; they fled to save their lives.

‘God did not abandon us’

Yet their experience seeking refuge has proved as difficult as their journey to the U.S., said Ceci. She and the other women were initially detained for nearly two weeks at San Luis Regional Detention Center in Arizona. “We would spend days without anything to do, and we were so worried about what was going to happen to us,” she said.

Their belongings were confiscated, in-

cluded eating and was inconsolable. “All she needed was a hug,” said Ceci. “Several of us formed a wall and looked out so another could offer her comfort. When she was embraced, she quickly regained her appetite. All she needed was some kindness, some warm human contact because she was so sad, and in so much pain. ... God was good to us. [God] did not abandon us for a second and helped us open doors.”

Some detention officials respected what the women were doing, while other officers would not even open the room for their weekly services, said Ceci. “We were very limited,” she explained. “Since our release, we have meditated greatly on those experiences. How often [do] we set our own limits in going to church because I am tired? Or, I don’t have time, or I have to do laundry? There is always something to do.”

Life in detention, however, offers nothing but time. “It is a form of mental torture with a person day after day doing absolutely nothing,” she said. “Having the prayer groups was the best form of spending that time with God. I will never forget those experiences.”

Many of their prayers were in gratitude, she said, even as many of the women around them were being deported. “We prayed that God would direct our paths and that the [officials] would be just and fair with us,” said Ceci. “Through today, [God] has not left our side.”

‘Remember those in prison’

Assemblies of God pastor Noe Nolberto Carías Mayorga, a native of Guatemala who had lived in California for more than two decades before being detained for nearly two months in 2017, also knows the misery of detention. In the Adelanto Detention Center near San Bernardino, Calif., he met immigrants about to be deported because

of criminal activity who said they had been treated better in U.S. prisons than in that federal immigration facility.

Because of his detention, Carias was prevented from attending his mother's funeral in Guatemala and was separated from his wife and two young children. He became sick during his detention and said he was near death due to a lack of proper medical attention in the facility. "But sickness is nothing compared to being separated from one's family," Carias said. "But if we look at the situation from another angle, God is the one who commands us and opens to us and the situation becomes so incredible, so beautiful."

In the detention center, Carias and another pastor held services for their fellow immigrants six days a week. Carias said the scripture that came to mind was from Hebrews 13: "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison

their children's school district, and others sustained them as well—even helping to pay their mortgage so they did not lose their home. "I got to know God more [intimately] than ever before," said Victoria. "And I also learned not to question God but to trust God."

The faith of her children also grew, she said, despite the trauma of being separated from their father and the continued uncertainty of waiting for the immigration proceedings that will determine his fate. "But I praise God for everything," she said. "Our journey is still not over but we trust in God that we will not be separated again and that [God] will give us this victory so that God's name can be glorified."

'How can we ever doubt God?'

The fate of Cecilia and Oscar's family also remains up in the air. The women were released in May 2019; the men remained in detention in California for another three months. Their trials, originally scheduled for earlier this

"Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them."

with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body."

"There were people [in detention] who had no hope of being released," Carias said. "God gave them joy. Even the ones who were deported, they were heartened to continue their faith journey. On one side, there was sadness and suffering. But on the other, we were fulfilling the will of God."

Some of the immigrants who were released now visit Carias at his church. Even as he awaits another immigration hearing in October, he remains in contact with others who are still in detention. The services he helped create are ongoing.

"I'm not surprised to find that Pastor Noe and other pastors in prison are sharing the word of the gospel and at the same time advocating for the safety of their fellow Christians or anybody," said Robert Chao Romero, associate professor of Chicana/o studies and Asian American studies at UCLA. "That is part of our [lives]. That is our legacy."

Romero is a part of the Matthew 25 movement—a coalition of more than 200 churches and organizations formed in California soon after Donald Trump's election to support vulnerable immigrant communities. The group coalesced around Carias' case and advocated for his release through letters and petitions.

Members of Matthew 25 provided support for Carias' wife, Victoria, and their children during her husband's detention. Assemblies of God members, other religious organizations,

year, were postponed by the coronavirus outbreak; at the time of writing, the trials had not been rescheduled. The ankle monitoring devices the twins wear—still visible below the hem of their long skirts—have become part of their daily lives.

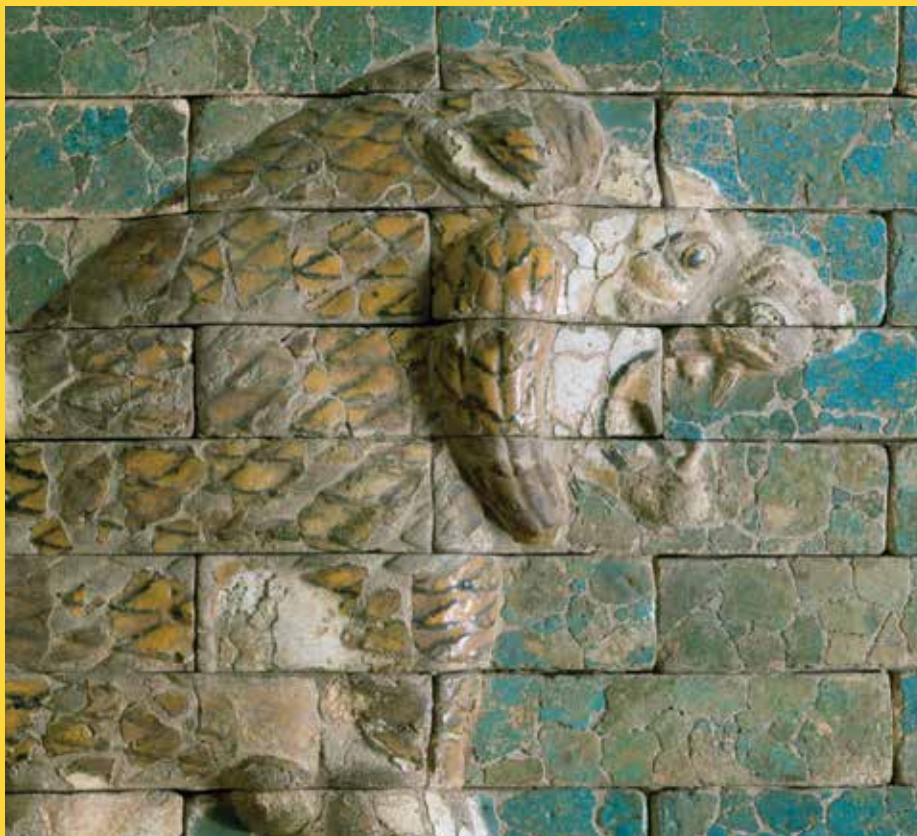
The family now lives near Washington, D.C., sustaining themselves with odd jobs. After the coronavirus outbreak, they were left without income, so Cecilia and the twins launched the "Protect Our Community" project in partnership with Activate Labs. Using donated and borrowed supplies, the project sold more than 1,200 cloth face masks to supporters all around the country. As a result, Activate Labs was able to donate more than \$10,000 in COVID-19 relief funds to three immigrant families, including Cecilia and Oscar's. Though the uncertainty of the pandemic reminded them of their detention experience, Cecilia was grateful to have a way to support her family, said Curca.

Through Facebook, the family continues the spiritual journey begun with fellow detainees. "Thanks be to God, we touched the hearts of many other people," said Cecilia's daughter Ceci. "We brought many people to the truth [of Jesus]." The women detained with them represented many denominations, but nothing mattered, said Ceci, except finding a way to glorify God together.

"There were many ... things that seemed impossible. But when we gathered and prayed, God would touch our lives in a way that we thought, 'How can we ever doubt God?'" Ceci said. "We were living in the worst conditions, but even then, God proved faithful and showed us saving grace even in detention." ❖

Annette Jiménez, a journalist with 20 years of experience, works as a program officer for the Community Foundation in Rochester, N.Y.

NIGERIA, IRAQ, AND GREECE WANT THEIR ARTIFACTS BACK.



This isn't a lion: It's a miracle. You can almost hear the imperious growls that would have thundered in the imaginations of pedestrians approaching ancient Babylon's Ishtar Gate. They would have walked along the Processional Way to enter the inner city, flanked by cerulean blue tile walls with 120 nearly life-sized lion bas-reliefs—a spectacle!

Not so in 1899, when German archaeologists arrived on the banks of the Euphrates—80 miles from Baghdad—and dug until 1917. Babylon's splendor had been reduced to mounds of thousands of glazed brick fragments, which would fill nearly 800 crates sent to Berlin. There, each piece was laboriously cleaned, stabilized with modern material, sorted and

Visual Art

assembled into whole bricks, and ultimately restored into panels of proudly parading beasts in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. Iraq has been trying to get them back since the 1990s.

For nearly two centuries the Greeks and the British have been arm wrestling over the Parthenon Marbles—including a lengthy frieze of a mythical Greek feast, a muscled river god, and voluptuous female figures—taken from the Acropolis in Athens and now displayed in London's British Museum. Lord Elgin was Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire,



which encompassed Greece. Greece claims that Lord Elgin stole them, that the sale was illegitimate since Greece was occupied, and that they should be returned.

The British Museum counters that its collections represent the complexity and richness of the whole world, accessible for free to 6 million international visitors annually, and also that, by law, they cannot break up collections. However, it will consider requests to borrow them—a stark contrast to the frequent advice of the independent British committee that monitors the export of art and cultural objects, which usually wants to keep them in the U.K. Greece is celebrating its 200th anniversary of independence in 2021 and has formally submitted a request.

A seemingly infinite number of “items” from formerly colonized parts of the world have been removed to institutions and collectors around the world. Taken with them? Transgenerational identity, memory, knowledge, ritual, inspiration, self-esteem—even agency, given that their owners were powerless to stop the theft. Are they still?

A case in point: The famed Benin Bronzes of the ancient Kingdom of Benin (located in present-day southern Nigeria) were looted in 1897 by a British expeditionary force. In a passionate op-ed published earlier this year in *The New York Times*, Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor—who formed an art installation out of statuettes made by modern bronze casters in Benin City, the former capital of the Kingdom of Benin—wrote: “Generations of Africans have already lost incalculable history and cultural reference points because of the absence of some of the best artworks created on the continent. We shouldn’t have to ask, over and over, to get back what is ours.”

In the works for 10 years, the current Benin royal family and Nigerian local and national governments plan to open a museum in Benin City in 2023, with at least 300 bronzes coming from collections of 10 major European museums, including the British Museum. Initially, arti-



Left: The Parthenon Marbles were taken from the Acropolis in Athens in the early 19th century and are now in the British Museum. Above: 16th century bronze head of Queen Idia of Benin, currently at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.

facts will be loaned for three years with possible renewal or replacement upon expiration—but not restituted.

A report commissioned a few years ago by French President Emmanuel Macron indicated items looted by the nation during the colonial era should be returned to their countries of origin. Macron pledged to return artifacts seized from the Kingdom of Dahomey (located in what is now the country Benin) by 2021. The transition has been slow in coming, however, and French cultural institutions question whether African counterparts have the infrastructure to provide proper shelter and care.

Yet another layer, some Africans protest, of colonial condescension. ✱

**TAKEN WITH
THEM? TRANS-
GENERATIONAL
IDENTITY,
MEMORY,
KNOWLEDGE,
RITUAL,
INSPIRATION,
SELF-ESTEEM—
EVEN AGENCY.**

Andrea M. Couture is a writer in New York City. She has worked in international development, human rights, and the visual arts.



From *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

PORTRAIT OF AN ECONOMY ON FIRE

By Chris Karnadi

T

Those on the margins live by a different economy. In the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the main characters live on the margins of a patriarchal society, and how they relate to one another

shows creative care.

In the film, set in 18th-century France, a painter and her subject—a woman scheduled to marry a nobleman in Milan—fall in love. The painter Marianne is hired under the guise of being a walking companion to Héloïse, who, as a symbol of rejection of her forthcoming marriage, refused to sit for a previous portraitist.

After Marianne shows Héloïse a portrait of her she's completed in secret, Héloïse criticizes it and agrees to sit for Marianne. During these few days of painting, Héloïse's mother leaves, and the house and its economy rearranges.

Earlier in the film, the three women left in the house had strict roles and responsibilities. Héloïse went for walks, Marianne painted, and the maid Sophie served food. However, as love develops between Héloïse and Marianne, the household leaves behind the strict norms of aristocracy and assumes a much more egalitarian space. In a striking scene filled with role reversal, the lady Héloïse cooks, the artist Marianne pours wine, and the maid Sophie cross-stitches. On the margins of patriarchy, the strict delineations of class are thrown away, and the three share responsibility

and care for one another.

In my second year of grad school, I was on food stamps. Due to some strange fortune or clerical error, I was given \$270 to shop for myself every month, well beyond what I could survive on. With so much to spend, I changed my habits. I bought food for other people: for the homeless people I worked with, for friends to celebrate an occasion. I brought nicer things to parties for everyone to enjoy.

Our economy is only beginning its contraction due to the coronavirus pandemic, and record-breaking numbers of people are unemployed. I am running out of fingers to count the friends who have lost their jobs, hours, and insurance as a consequence of the crisis, and I'm sure you are too.

The economy has never worked for those on the margins. The players in the center make and bend the rules for themselves, prioritizing their profit over people. But one thing that anyone on the margins knows is that we will break those rules. We will make our own way together. ♦

Chris Karnadi is an assistant editor of Duke Divinity's Faith and Leadership.

"POPULATION: ONE"

When petrochemical plants overtook a historically black community in Louisiana, its residents were forced to leave one by one. But Stacey Ryan refused to go. *Mossville: When Great Trees Fall* is a documentary about Ryan's commitment and resistance to environmental racism.

Passion River Films



Benediction

In *The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church*, Gail Cafferata highlights the voices of 130 pastors who have served churches in their final days. Drawing from personal experience and interviews, Cafferata's book features lessons learned from challenging situations.

Westminster John Knox Press



Look Elsewhere

Puerto Rican pastor and activist Marlena Graves shares about the process of selfless transformation in *The Way Up Is Down: Becoming Yourself by Forgetting Yourself*. Embracing traditions from Eastern and Western theology, Graves shows readers how to become who God has already made them to be.

IVP

AMERICAN BROADBAND

By
Danny Duncan
Collum



Eyes & Ears

For over a month now, like everyone else, I have been isolated at home. Here with me are my wife, Polly, and our two youngest sons, both college students. All of us are continuing our work and studies online, and our rural home has

become a sort of cyber-monastery. We meet in the morning for daily Mass on YouTube, then peel off to our separate hotspots to toil through the day. We don't have compline, but we do often reconvene to watch *The West Wing*.

This isn't the life any of us would have chosen, but it's probably good for the soul to surrender some of our precious, almighty power of choice, and it helps that almost everyone is going through this with us. But there's one aspect of our locked-down life that we can't attribute to the vagaries of a random virus, and it isn't shared with most of our fellow citizens. Instead, it's one of the many rank inequalities the COVID-19 crisis has exposed in American life.

Unlike most of you, we don't have access to high-speed broadband internet. Two months ago, that might have seemed like a trivial complaint, but not now. And we're far from alone. The best estimate says that there are about 42 million of us, about 13 percent of the U.S. population, mostly in rural

ABOUT 30 PERCENT OF US ARE OUT HERE IN THE DIGITAL GOLD.

America. Then there are all the people who could have access to broadband, but don't, mostly because they can't afford it. All told, about 30 percent of us are out here in the digital cold.

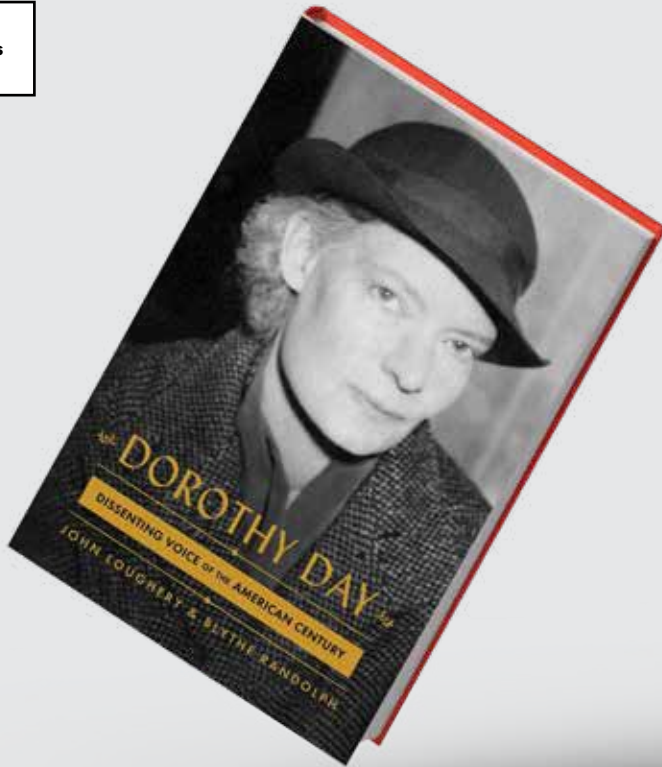
The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines broadband access as an average download speed of 25 Mbps (megabits per second). Today, mine is 0.4 Mbps. Obviously, you can't run Zoom meetings on that. Instead, we've had to shell out big bucks to our cell phone provider for unlimited data. But phone service here is spotty, too, so that only gets us 2 to 5 Mbps, depending on where you are in the house.

We're limping along with that, and our direct payment from Uncle Sam will help with the added expense. So we certainly aren't among the most digitally impoverished. Meanwhile, I've heard from several of my students who depended on the university infrastructure of free internet, computer labs, and loaner laptops for their digital lives. Now they're at home, using their data plans to try to get schoolwork done on smartphones or tablets.

For all of us in this lo-fi bind, it is an added stress in a stressful situation. And it grates to know that most people aren't going through it. It grates even more to know how easily it could have been avoided. At this point, four presidential administrations have acknowledged the necessity of universal internet access for full participation in 21st century American life. And none of them have done anything significant to make it happen.

In late March, Congress passed a grand, bipartisan, \$2 trillion COVID-19 relief package. The amount in that package for extending broadband internet to the underserved was, you guessed it, zero. ❖

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.



**DAY'S LEADERSHIP WAS
CONFIRMED BY THE YOUNG
PEOPLE WHO CAME TO HER
FOR SUPPORT AND STRENGTH
IN RESISTING THE DRAFT.**

Greenwich Village; and her first arrest—as a suffragist.

They give details of her affair with Lionel Moise and tragic, brutal abortion at the hands of Ben Retiman. They speak of her only novel, *The Eleventh Virgin*, her brief marriage to Berkeley Tobey, her finding love and happiness with Forster Batterham, and the birth of her daughter Tamar, an event that brought her to Catholicism but forced her to leave Batterham. They describe a reporting trip to cover a Washington, D.C., protest, during which she prayed that God would send her a way to reconcile Catholicism with her pacifism and socialism, and her eventful meeting with Peter Maurin. That meeting, and the graced if sometimes fraught collaboration that resulted, confirmed how closely her original understandings resonated with the teachings of the New Testament and the encyclicals of several popes.

Day and Maurin published the first *Catholic Worker* newspaper on May Day 1933, and the resulting Catholic Worker movement spread across the country and throughout the world. This book explores the growth in Day's spirituality as she lived out

her lifelong commitment to the poor and pacifism during the Spanish Civil War, the World War II era, and the Vietnam times, when her leadership was confirmed by the young people who came to her for support and strength in resisting the draft.

Loughery and Randolph's extensive research may have allowed an occasional error to creep into their manuscript, including acknowledging me as "the late Rosalie Riegle Troester," but their tremendous work has borne substantial and worthwhile fruit. *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century* shows that even as she became an icon of the Left, Day remained intensely human. The paradoxes of a sensitive woman called to be a dissenting voice in a world that largely ignores gospel teachings deserve wide reading, informed discussion, and generous sharing. ✕

Rosalie G. Riegle is a Catholic Worker oral historian and the author of *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*.

INTENSELY HUMAN

Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice
of the American Century,
by John Loughery
and Blythe Randolph

Simon & Schuster

John Loughery and Blythe Randolph have written a compelling and complete biography of a complex woman who may be the next American saint—and written it with a vibrant, personal voice. They place Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day's life in historical context, something the small circle of the Catholic Left I inhabit sometimes doesn't see, which makes this book different than others about her. It inserts her life squarely into the times in which she lived and shows how her fidelity to the gospel as a journalist, activist, and Christian anarchist put her at odds with both church and state. It also shows how she persisted, becoming more and more herself as she aged.

Loughery and Randolph describe Day's childhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., Oakland, Calif., and finally Chicago; her recognition of an affinity with socialism and pacifism while at the University of Illinois; the men and women she worked and drank with during her young days in



WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE

Parable of the Sower
and *Parable of the Talents*,
by Octavia E. Butler

Grand Central Publishing



In *March*, I made my first, and hopefully last, “panic-buy” of the pandemic: three survivalist books that look more like they belong in a nuclear bunker than on my bookshelves amid the theology, poetry, and knitting patterns. My purchases were, however, inspired by my reading *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, classics by the science fiction literary giant Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006).

In these novels, Lauren Olamina—a young, disabled black girl—survives the apocalypse and helps rebuild society with her knowledge of edible wild plants, her sheer will and bravery, and her newfound religion, Earthseed. Lauren’s ability to adapt, to change, is her route through unimaginable suffering and the bedrock of her faith.

Originally published in 1993 and 1998, respectively, Butler’s *Parable* books were reissued last year, highlighting their current resonance. *Sower* introduces us to the United States in 2024, a dystopia ravaged by global warming, capitalism, and violence. Slavery, misogyny—the witch-burning kind—homelessness, and addiction are rampant. Lauren’s community is secure as long as the walls that surround it stand; as she rightly senses, walls are wont to crumble. She launches a backup plan that offers a hard hope within relentless loss. *Talents* continues Lauren’s, and her daughter Asha’s, journeys over the coming decades as the U.S. faces rising terrorist

Christian nationalism and the election of an ultraconservative president who wants to “make America great again.”

Butler’s vision of the future is, as *Talents’* back cover says, “shockingly prescient.” However, her gift is not simply the prophetic. Countless scenes evoke historic atrocities—transatlantic slavery, the Holocaust, U.S. Indian boarding schools. Beholding widespread poverty, illiteracy, and disease, Lauren wonders what century life in the 2030s is approximating. The 19th? 18th? As society regresses, Lauren’s journey and religion make clear that we can’t “go back.”

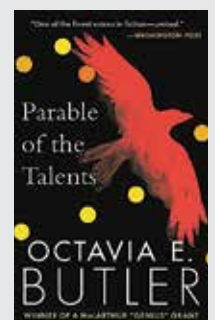
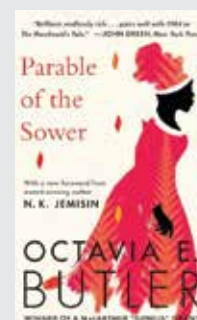
As with COVID-19, the *Parable* books reveal deeper fissures, preexisting pressures exploding at the foundation.

The strength of Butler’s storytelling is its personal appraisal of this societal cataclysm. Lauren observes, “People ignore one another in self-defense. I find this both useful and frightening.” Relationships—sibling, parent, stranger, neighbor—inhabit the heart of the novels and social collapse.

Butler resisted claims of literary clairvoyance and instead framed her books as cautionary tales. She named *Sower* and *Talents* after Matthean parables containing this assessment of human capacity and choice: “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Abundance and lack determine fates.

When I purchased extreme survivalist literature earlier this year, I misread Butler’s lessons, erring (though with less lethal outcomes) like those who panic-bought guns. What we have may well determine our survival, but discerning *what* to have in abundance is key. ❖

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.



NEW TERMS

An excerpt from
Becoming Brave:
 Find the Courage to Pursue
 Racial Justice Now,
 by Brenda Salter McNeil
 Brazos Press



To understand my evolution as a reconciliation leader, you must first understand that I began my journey sincerely believing that if I could convince evangelical Christians that reconciliation was not some politically motivated agenda but a biblical calling rooted in Scripture, they would pursue racial justice. For years I tried to be biblical enough, nonthreatening enough, patient enough, persuasive enough, theologically rigorous enough, so that no one could say I had a hidden agenda.

That's what my ministry was about for a very long time. I preached the good news of multiculturalism and diversity at churches and conferences. I led workshops and taught seminars and told people about inclusion and equity and how Jesus demonstrated these principles in his ministry.

But along the way, there were indicators that my approach, while good and well-intentioned, was not effecting the type of change I knew in my heart needed to take place.

Another question has emerged: What am I going to do about it? The answer is clear in my spirit, but not easy. I decided to become brave—to say the things that I must say and to stand for the truth, regardless of the consequences.

My reconciliation work has been deeply concerned with how my message will be received by white people. I made my message easy for them to hear. But no more. I have come to realize that I was used by white-dominant culture, probably unconsciously, to make the conversation about racial reconciliation more palatable to them.

But in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, with the white supremacy that evidenced itself in insidious and subtle ways, I made up my mind to no longer be used in this way. I will no longer preach, teach, or lead reconciliation on white-dominant culture's terms. ♦

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LATE STOP FOR GAS AT VALERO

By Jes Simmons



The later it gets, the more nothing.
—Woman at the register

Yeah, we're open 'til midnight,
but few customers come after 9:00.
I like when it's slow and quiet—
just me and the store lights.
I don't like the sirens
racing along Main Street.
I always worry it's my kid hurt
or my best girlfriend with another
black eye or busted rib.
When I'm here by myself, I draw
dress patterns for my daughter.

She's seven, and a mess, I tell you.
I make her clothes on weekends,
lay her on a sheet of butcher paper,
then trace around her with a crayon
—shoulders, waist, hips—talking
fabrics and colors, lace and spangles.
I'm ticklish, but she pays no mind
to the tracing, just grins and laughs,
rolling her eyes as I haul her up
and set her in the wheelchair.
You need a receipt? Have a nice night.

Jes Simmons, a second-generation poet and jazz drummer, works at Longwood University and lives in Farmville, Va.

Leave a legacy for generations to come.



Women's March in Washington, D.C., January 2019 / Anna Sutterer / Sojourners

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WHEN ORDINARY TIME IS ANYTHING BUT

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By Valerie Bridgeman



Living the Word

Ordinary time rarely is. These texts in July fall in “ordinary” time on the Christian liturgical calendar, that time after the holy days of Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. I often think about the irony

of this time being designated “ordinary,” since rarely is it ordinary or mundane. There usually is something going on in the world that demands our attention or causes us concern. Certainly, that is true in this season of the coronavirus. So “ordinary,” as we know it, is hardly an apt term.

The term “ordinary,” which comes from the “ordinal” numerals by which the weeks are counted, reflects that we are not in the season of “high holy” days, except for an occasional recognition of a saint or significant moment in history for the church writ large. Ordinary time is just under half of the Sundays on the calendar. It is the time when Christians recount the stories of their faith, across the biblical canon, in order to strengthen their commitments to discipleship and to study and reflect on what it means to be the people of God, both in one’s own life and in the community’s formation.

These Sundays in July capture the day-to-day nature of our faith. The parables in Matthew give us glimpses of God’s reign, tantalizing us. Paul’s letters remind us that sometimes we really struggle to become who God created us to be. The texts call us into curiosity, into covenant, into commitment, and into community. It is an extraordinary challenge.

Valerie Bridgeman is dean and vice president of academic affairs and an associate professor of homiletics and Hebrew Bible at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

MY GRANDPARENTS’ ROOFTOP WAS A “THIN PLACE.”

JULY 5

DISCERNING OUR WAY

GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67;
PSALM 45:10-17; ROMANS 7:15-25;
MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

At first blush, the Hebrew Bible texts for this week are all about finding and celebrating one’s mate for life. Abraham’s servant (Genesis 24:34) goes to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham’s kindred. Since the servant doesn’t know who they are, he must come to some way to discern. How will he know? He prays for success. He prays that the woman he finds will be willing to leave her family. And, like the bride in Psalm 45, Rebekah does indeed return with him. Here we read the end of the trip, but Genesis 24 begins with the servant’s angst about how to know.

How to know. These stories show us at least one way to know: Pray and look for signs. But looking for signs does not always work. Maybe it worked here because the servant did not ask for himself, but for Abraham’s sake. Maybe were he looking for himself, his own desires might get in the way. Perhaps that is what Romans 7 points toward. We are burdened with human nature that struggles to do the right thing, to find what the right thing is to do. Paul says, “nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh” (verse 18). These words could be jarring to us. They are to me. I want to believe that we are fundamentally good at discernment, that our “flesh” (Paul’s word for our selfish nature) doesn’t drive our desires. But if I am honest, I must confess that it does.

The “warring” nature is shown in Jesus’ parable. The children, Jesus says, taunt one another. Fasting or feasting, Jesus says, the generation criticized the religious ones around them—John the Baptist, fasting; the Son of the Human One, feasting (Matthew 11:18-19). We’ve just left Lenten fasting and Eastertide

feasting. How do we discern what is right? How do we strengthen our faithfulness when our human nature resists? These texts push us to consider the way God leads us and refreshes us along the way.

JULY 12

I SWEAR

GENESIS 25:19-34; PSALM 119:105-112;
ROMANS 8:1-11; MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

“Be careful what you say,” my mother admonished. “You can’t take words back, no matter how much you wish you could.” My mother repeated these warnings so much to us as children that they are ingrained in my thinking. I repeated them to my own children, and they use them with theirs. You can’t take it back. But how often have I uttered words I immediately regretted or made promises that I couldn’t or didn’t keep. People often make rash vows when they feel distressed. In the case of Esau, it was hunger. “Famished!” he exclaimed (Genesis 25:30). I don’t know that it is always wrong to “swear an oath,” as Jacob demanded of Esau to give up his birthright for a bowl of food, but Esau’s decision certainly seems foolish. We ought to consider the unintended price to pay when we make rash statements or vows. This is true, even when we swear an oath to observe God’s ordinances, as in Psalm 119:106. The difference for the psalmist, of course, is the acknowledgement that the vow is because God’s decrees are our heritage and birthright, “the joy” of our hearts (verse 111).

Keeping vows requires God’s help and for us to lean into our relationship with the Holy. Our human inclinations, what Paul calls “our flesh,” cannot keep faith with our promises. We need strength that comes from and in our relationship with Christ (Romans 8:3). And, so we must deepen our roots in Christ. The parable of the sower sharpens that image. While the psalmist encourages us to meditate on God’s word, Matthew wants us to ensure that our lives are prepared to live that word (13:23). Be careful what you say, then, becomes “be careful who you are.” Weed well so that your words and your life produce the gospel. First in your own life, and then in your witness in the world.

JULY 19

DREAMING OF GOD

GENESIS 28:10-19; PSALM 139:1-12, 23-24;
ROMANS 8:12-25; MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

My grandfather built a cinder-block house on his farm when he and my grandmother first married. As a child, I learned to climb to the roof by a tree and an antenna pole. From there, I’d watch the clouds or stars. My grandparents’ rooftop was a “thin place,” a place so close to heaven that the veil between earth and the divine realm seemed suspended. I dreamed and imagined on that roof. I also believe God planted the purposes of my life there. “Thin place” is an old Celtic Christian term to describe what I experienced on the roof, and what Jacob experienced as he slept with a stone pillow and dreamed of a ladder between the heavens and earth (Genesis 28:11-12). Jacob awakened afraid and in awe. That is how I feel about my grandparents’ roof—a place that witnessed all God was calling me to. It gave witness to my belief that God saw me and knew me (Psalm 139:1).

God’s persistent and pursuing knowledge of us and our ways has come to be a comfort to me. When I feel as if I am stumbling in the dark, I am reminded that for God, “the night is as bright as the day” (verse 12). God’s spirit bears witness that we are God’s children (Romans 8:16). Being God’s child does not eliminate suffering. But knowing that God knows us and makes openings for us may give comfort when we are in labor pains to see our dreams or best selves come into being (Romans 8:22-23).

I should tell you that sometimes I got bit by ants or stung by bees on my grandparents’ roof. God’s presence does not actually preclude struggle or even evil. The parable of the weeds bears witness to that truth. I don’t know how evil works, but this parable says it’s deceptive and creeps in the night. But remember, night is like day to God. One day those who dream with God will be freed from evil’s influence. We will “shine like the sun,” Matthew says.

**KEEPING VOWS REQUIRES US TO
LEAN INTO OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH THE HOLY.**

JULY 26

HOW TO WAIT

GENESIS 29:15-28; PSALM 105:1-11, 45;
ROMANS 8:26-39; MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

Waiting is not my superpower. I have never been convinced of the adage “Anything worth having is worth waiting for.” But some of the best of life requires time. Good soup needs time to simmer. The parables in Matthew 13 teach us that a valuable, precious relationship with God is worth pursuing. Metaphors matter here. Whether trusting that the smallest action will produce something sturdy in our lives (verse 52) or learning to believe that just because you cannot see it, doesn’t mean that God’s not at work or that our smallest effort for good can have an impact (verse 33). I like these parables for their God imagery, metaphors that are familiar but push toward more than we can imagine. Whether Bakerwoman or Merchant or Fisher, these images give us many aspects of God’s desire and longing for us. They also provoke our own longing. As the psalmist invites, they push us to “seek God’s presence continually” (Psalm 105:4). The God who loves us like these parables suggest is the same God who does not withhold good from us, Romans 8:32 declares. Therein is the gospel.

If God did not withhold God’s own son, why would we believe God would withhold any good from us, even if we must wait for it? God is not like Laban who withholds from Jacob his beloved Rachel, first for seven years, then for another week after he has been tricked (Genesis 29:18, 27). We can trust that God is true to God’s own covenant, both with us and with God’s self. When we remember the blessings God has given, praise wells up, and we remember that the secret to our waiting is to know that God keeps covenant with us (Psalm 105:6). Romans 8:38-39 proclaims that, whether waiting, working, struggling, dancing, or dying, we belong to God. That truth may not make waiting easy, but it will make it possible in faith. ❖

“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



HOPE IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS ... NO WAIT... THAT'S FAITH.

By Ed Spivey Jr.

Here at *Sojourners*, we're all about hope: Finding signs of hope, praying for the gift of hope, living a life that embodies hope. Heck, I've even designed bumper stickers with that word, some of which are still on cars, expressing hope—albeit a weathered and faded hope—from the parking spaces where they've been for weeks.

But sometimes our hopes crumble in disappointment. As scientists work feverishly to develop drugs to counter the coronavirus, many alternative treatments trigger our sense of optimism and raise our hopes, only to be dashed when they prove ineffective, unproven, or laughably ridiculous to most sentient beings except Sean Hannity.

The promise of hydroxychloroquine, for example, was touted by Fox News for a month before it was finally debunked as ineffective and, in some cases, fatal. But now that the president claims to be using it, I'm glad I worked on the pronunciation: *Hydroxychloroquine*, *hydroxychloroquine*, *hydroxychloroquine*. (See? I've been practicing.)

A similar, more pronounceable chemical compound—chloroquine phosphate—also showed promise. Mainly used for cleaning aquariums, its medical efficacy was suggested by its ability to clear glass of slimy buildup that appears much more tenacious than any virus. (Despite being exposed to the chemical for years, those little deep-sea divers show no ill effect.)

Unfortunately, epidemiologists' quick denunciation of this chemical unfairly slandered pet store products as a class

LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED IN OUR SEARCH FOR WHAT'S UNDER THE STONE.

and essentially ruled out—prematurely, in my view—other possible cures that might be found in that venue. Just because gerbil vitamins and flea shampoo haven't been used in human trials doesn't mean they can't be efficacious. (And call me crazy, but I don't know why Dr. Fauci isn't looking into Marshall's Ferret Hairball Treatment. What virus could survive *that*?)

The president himself raised some commonsense solutions to combatting the virus. And if the manufacturers of Lysol hadn't publicly discouraged the practice, injecting disinfectants directly into the body might have shown potential. Yes, it goes against the instructions on the label, but who reads that? And if the makers of Clorox bleach didn't want it used for medicinal purposes, why is the cap the perfect dosage size?

Sunlight and ultraviolet light were other curatives proposed by the president, whose naturally golden skin suggests an intimate familiarity with both. Presumably heeding his advice, thousands of Trump supporters are prepared to expose themselves for lengthy periods to the sun or tanning salons. (Is that why they call them red states?)

I'm also interested in what chemical compound enables Mike Pence to stand motionless at the president's side for two hours at a time. (I can't even hold a plank for 60 seconds and I'm horizontal, almost laying down.) And how the vice president speaks at length without taking a breath is another question for which a drug may be the answer. He does this mainly during interviews with journalists, thus preventing the follow-up questions that might infect the comfort zone of an uninformed public. It's mesmerizing to watch and difficult to explain. But perhaps he's testing another product from pet stores, say, amitriptyline—used in dogs to treat anxiety, it can also contribute to a thick, shiny coat.

Because, let's be honest, the vice president's hair has never looked better. ♦

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

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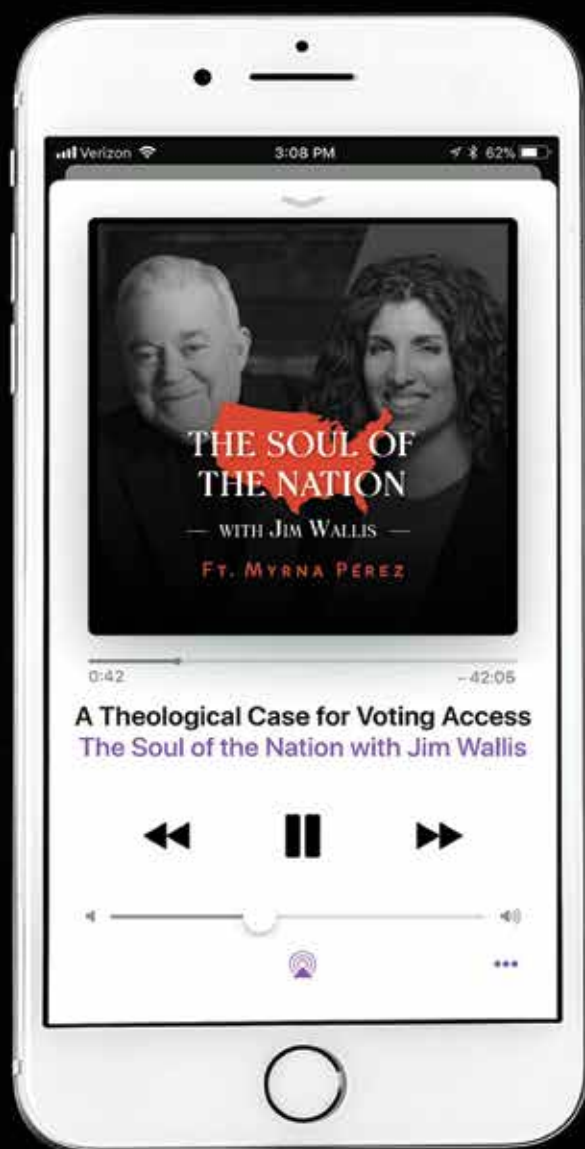
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